
Bob Woodward's *Bush At War*

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Introduction

In his book *Bush at War*,¹ Bob Woodward offers a compelling and apparently extraordinarily well informed account of the first 100 days following the attacks of 11 September 2001. It is a book which deals almost entirely with the personalities, debates, strategic formulations and actions of President Bush and his strategic level advisers, concentrating on the response in Afghanistan, but also touching on Middle East diplomacy and introducing the recent Iraq campaign.

Author, credentials and access

Bob Woodward is a credible researcher and author. He is an assistant managing editor for the *Washington Post* and is responsible for that paper's special investigative projects, and his career-setting earlier works exposed Nixon in the Watergate Affair. *Bush at War* represents his ninth significant work (and another best seller of many) and one consistent in flavour—as a political exposé—with preceding displays of skill and penchant.²

Woodward's access to records, transcripts and the principals themselves seems extraordinary. The political likelihood of such insight being offered to a journalist of a not always pro-White House newspaper, on such a current event, and in the year of an election would seem dubious without some favourable assurances having been made. This considered, the book is suspiciously complimentary of Bush and his leadership performance. Woodward *is* at times quite scathing of the people and processes under Bush's watch—not by subjective judgement but by simple presentation of incriminating dialogue.³ However, Bush largely escapes such criticism. Where judgement errors by Bush are revealed (for example, his unwise choice of 'crusade' to describe the American response), all are minor.

Woodward in his latest book—*Plan of Attack*⁴—is criticised for the same bias. As one reviewer states:

on the surface, the book is hardly flattering to President Bush ... what the White House likes – and why Bush in fact collaborated with Woodward – is that the book portrays Bush as the man in charge, as a resolute and decisive leader.⁵

Strategic themes

Claims made in this book are around four broad themes. First, that of contrast in individual style between strategic leaders. Bush: the moral warrior;⁶ always in control; uniting;⁷ respected; remaining above the occasional clashes of the staff but smart, trusting and sensitive to the needs of his people;⁸ always pressuring his staff for action⁹ and occasionally inspiring the masses.¹⁰

Other character performances in the crucible of strategic decision-making are not always complimentary. Cheney: the extreme conservative, unilateralist and realist; influential and paranoid about threat groups (Russian, WMD or terrorist).¹¹ Rice: the highly respected and influential author of timely and incisive questions who significantly keeps the process on track. Rumsfeld: the clever, superficially casual and highly articulate individual who fails in practical leadership when the

process most needs him to take control and orchestrate affairs.¹² Powell: coalition advocate; direct; ethical and moderating on the team's war rhetoric—but the target of personality tensions with Cheney and Rumsfeld.¹³

Of particular note, the military leadership takes significant criticism in this book. Generals Shelton and subsequently Myers¹⁴ (along with General Franks¹⁵) are generally characterised as silent and deferring when superiors are present, but slow to perform¹⁶ and as good at working around orders as following them. Woodward cites no less than 14 references in the index under 'military; lack of plans in'.¹⁷

The roles, interplays and occasionally dysfunctional relationships of these and other individuals are explored in such extraordinary detail as to occasionally resemble a drama script.¹⁸ Assuming accuracy, the exposé offers an excellent insight into the almost alarming 'ordinariness' of the people in charge of the world's superpower.

The related second broad theme of this book is that of the strategic decision-making process. The highlight is the account of the actual nature of the White House's chaotic and frustrating strategy formulation under pressure. At the highest strategic level where one might most expect to find a logical, systematic and thoroughly staffed approach to high-consequence decision-making, a real lack of science is much more apparent. Deputy National Security Adviser Steve Hadley saw the war-planning process as a makeshift 'Come as you are' arrangement, being made up as they went.¹⁹

'Indecision' and the 'absence of a plan' persist as sub-themes throughout the book. Meetings frequently finish without decisions and an agreed overarching strategy remains illusive throughout. America's response seems nothing more sophisticated than a poorly articulated one of simple retaliation until D+19. At this point the notion of attack for 'pre-emption' is first mentioned.²⁰

Rumsfeld and the military were both depicted as indecisive and lacking plans. The point was powerfully illustrated when it became apparent late in the piece that nobody in cabinet knew who had primacy for the joined up effort.²¹ At D+30, Bush was still saying: 'It's going to be a long conflict, we've got to have a deliberate, intense and well-thought-out strategy',²² and it was almost unfathomable that an offensive plan with greater than 72 hours foresight still did not exist at D+22.²³

Micro-management of planning was also rife. It was difficult to accept that Rumsfeld might *initiate* thinking on CIA insertion,²⁴ or that the President would actually be *initiating* ideas to do with CSAR and force basing.²⁵

The third theme of this book was the creation and exploitation of international relationships. This ranged from the direct use of cash to buy tribal support, to the cultivation of support from old adversaries (such as Russia²⁶) and neutrals (such as Uzbekistan), to the judicious use of the unilateralism, to the waiving of sanctions on Pakistan and the appeasement of Islam through sympathetic rhetoric.

The constant dialogue between the Secretary of State and the leaders of other nations to maintain their stakeholdership or avoid their opposition²⁷—even with unilateralism contemplated—was well demonstrated.

The fourth theme of the book was perception management. This involved evidence of Bush's constant cognisance of public opinion and opportunities for its manipulation through the clever filtering, timing, and the style of public message. It included the art of 'public diplomacy'²⁸ (or propaganda) implicit in the strategic public communications necessary for mandate.²⁹ It also illustrated the selective withholding of bad news from the public,³⁰ the measures required to manage public expectations,³¹ and the will to avoid public affairs driving military operations.³²

Comparative material

This book is without a bibliography, and not surprisingly so. As Tim Hames of *The Times* (London) comments:³³

not merely the first draft of history but something close to its most significant source.

As such, there is simply no more authoritative account currently available as a basis for comparison.

An account published in April 2004 by former US counter-terrorism official Richard Clarke³⁴ does proffer an alternative view. It is a much less complimentary analysis of Bush's handling of affairs through September 11 and the Iraqi invasion.³⁵ Indeed, it contends that Bush and his advisers failed to understand the nature and gravity of terrorism before or after 11 September, and that the approaches taken are destined to bring more attacks on American interests.³⁶ Clarke has subsequently testified to this effect to a federal commission reviewing the attacks. While charged with being a Kerry supporter and with sensationalising claims in order to sell his own book, Clarke's contrasting opinion is nevertheless of interest.

After *Supreme Command*,³⁷ Eliot Cohen would presumably have mixed impressions of the Bush team performance based on Woodward's account. After dispelling the traditional myth that 'politicians should define the goals and leave the military to wage the war',³⁸ Cohen might see the Presidential micro-management as a healthy sign of sustained leadership engagement in these issues. On the other hand, he would be less impressed with the war cabinet's meandering attempt to fix strategy. And the Generals would be guilty of failing to fulfil the contract for the 'unequal dialogue' idealised in Cohen's thesis.

In *Rise of the Vulcans*,³⁹ James Mann verifies some of Woodward's claims. While the book is as much about the origins and evolution of Bush's foreign policy, it deals also with Bush's team, corroborating evidence on the key personalities, and carefully depicting relationships (such as the animosities between Rumsfeld and Armitage, and Powell).⁴⁰

Summary

Bush at War is favourably reminiscent of Richard T. Reynolds' account of military leadership and decision-making in the 1991 Gulf War.⁴¹ Reynolds produced a stunningly candid record of the personal politics, the duplicated planning efforts and communication failures at play during military strategy formulation for the Gulf War.

Bush at War is a comparable account but at the grand strategic level. It reads as a refreshingly honest account of the *actual* behind-the-scenes goings-on. It is in welcome contrast to the sort of sterilised doctrinal accounts from military revisionists with the unhelpful predilection for 'tidying-up' records for better fit with theory. *Bush at War* is an apparently well-informed warts-and-all coverage of the crude realities of chaotic strategy formulation. While it quite effectively depicts the political uncertainty, complexity and volatility in the strategic leadership environment, it is also a sobering and largely uncomplimentary account of the process and many of the players. This opinion is at least partially verified by the contemporary James Mann, but the character of Bush is suspiciously embellished and this is borne out in work by Richard Clarke. While the credentials of the author are excellent, his access to the President and the timing of his book raise suspicions about its objectivity.

Overall, *Bush at War* offers a valuable, candid and sobering insight into the realities of White House affairs during crisis. Comparative works are rare for this ‘first draft’ of history, but apart from the suspiciously kind treatment of Bush himself, none of the contemporary documentation disagrees substantially with the portrait painted.

Endnotes

1. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2002.
2. Woodward biography: <<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/woolbio-1>>, accessed 22 April 2004.
3. For example, Rumsfeld's angry outburst, *Bush at War*, p. 319.
4. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, Simon & Schuster, April 2004. (Not widely available at the time of this review).
5. *Plan of Attack* media commentary by Daniel Snider (foreign affairs correspondent columnist for the *Mercury News*): <www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/opinion/8491346.htm?1c>, 22 April 2003, accessed 22 April 2004.
6. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 131.
7. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 95, paragraphs 4 and 5.
8. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 74.
9. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 62 to p. 63, paragraph 2.
10. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 108, paragraph 5.
11. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 129, paragraphs 6 and 7.
12. *Bush at War*, p. 246.
13. As exemplified by the 'A-team vs B-team' description of opinion about going to war with Iraq, *Bush at War*, pp. 325, 332.
14. Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
15. Commander in Chief, CENTCOM.
16. Military input was alarmingly absent for weeks, with CIA taking the de facto lead. To illustrate, see discussion, *Bush at War*, p. 141.
17. *Bush at War*, p. 372.
18. Indeed, movie rights for this book have already been taken up by Sony.
19. *Bush at War*, p. 182.
20. *Bush at War*, p. 176.
21. Graphically coming to a head in *Bush at War*, pp. 243–244.
22. *Bush at War*, p. 227.
23. *Bush at War*, p. 191.
24. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 124.
25. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 186, paragraph 4.
26. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 118, last paragraph.
27. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 146–149, a progress round-up on a dozen countries.
28. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 122.
29. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 115, paragraph 2.
30. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 116–117 (where the FBI watch list grows shockingly large).
31. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 135, paragraph 6.
32. For example, *Bush at War*, p. 167, paragraph 2.
33. A review comment amongst others inside the front cover of the book.
34. Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*, HarperCollins, Australia, 01 April 2004.
35. Books in the news: <<http://www.seekbooks.com.au>>, accessed 18 April 2004.

36. Editorial Reviews: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0743260244/ref=ase_michaelleggcom/104890464-7534349>, accessed 18 April 2004.
37. Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime*, Free Press, June 2002.
38. *Supreme Command* book review: <http://www.csis.org/europe/pubs/Cohen_supremecommand.pdf>, Fall 2002, accessed 19 April 2004.
39. James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, Viking Press, March 2004.
40. *Rise of the Vulcans* Review: <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0670032999/103-7980866-1778248?v=glance>>, accessed 22 April 2004.
41. Colonel Richard T. Reynolds, *Heart of the Storm: The Genesis of the Air Campaign Against Iraq*, Air University Press, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, January 1995.

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