

Bush at War: a flattering portrait of a government of the political underworld

Bush at War, by Bob Woodward, 2002, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.

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This is the latest in a series of behind-the-scenes books by the *Washington Post* journalist of Watergate fame. Over the past 16 years Woodward has cranked out a half dozen such volumes on the major institutions of official Washington. The CIA, the Pentagon, the Supreme Court, the Clinton White House and Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan have all received this largely adulatory treatment, and now it is the turn of the Bush administration, in a retelling of the 100 days which followed the September 11 terrorist attacks.

First, a few words on method and style. Woodward produces what one critic has termed “journalistic fiction,” a novelized version of current events in which he cites innumerable conversations—there are an estimated 15,000 words directly quoted in the book—as well as the thoughts and interior monologues of various White House personalities. Bush, Rumsfeld, Powell, Rice, Tenet, Rove and many others agreed to interviews. Woodward blends these self-serving accounts, in which his subjects profess to recall the exact words they and others spoke at various meetings over a three-month period, into what purports to be a verbatim narrative.

The result is presented in a juvenile style: short declarative sentences, sound-bite quotes, with plenty of banal sports metaphors. This is not only a book that flatters Bush, but is also one the US president, notoriously impatient with study, complex analysis and other higher intellectual functions, could actually read and enjoy.

Bush at War accepts the entire framework of the official Bush administration version of September 11: the terrorist attacks came as a bolt from the blue, with no warning; the US government quickly identified Osama bin Laden as the likely instigator; the refusal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to hand over bin Laden left the US no choice but to invade Afghanistan and overthrow the regime, using the opposition Northern Alliance. There is not a word of serious analysis or criticism in the entire volume.

Key episodes are glossed over in the book, as several reviewers and critics have noted: Woodward avoids serious examination of Bush’s own movements on September 11, which strongly suggest panic or loss of control; he is silent on the decision to evacuate all members of the bin Laden family living in the United States (among the heirs to the Saudi construction fortune are close business associates of the Bush family); he does not discuss such events as the anthrax attacks on Senate Democratic leaders, which facilitated passage of the USA Patriot Act, and the mass arrests of Arab and South Asian immigrants.

There are a few kernels in the mountain of chaff, however, and these are worth noting as American imperialism heads into a second, and far larger, military conflict. These mostly fall into the category of inconvenient facts

that do not fit into the template of administration war propaganda.

One passage recounts the reaction of CIA Director George Tenet to the news of the jetliners striking the World Trade Center. “I wonder,” Tenet said, “if it has anything to do with this guy taking pilot training.” He was referring to Zacarias Moussaoui, whom the FBI had ordered detained on immigration violations a month before the September 11 attacks. This demonstrates that information on Moussaoui had reached the highest levels of the intelligence apparatus well before the terrorist attacks, contradicting Bush administration claims that FBI supervisors in Washington were solely responsible for blocking action on the case.

Woodward also asserts that the CIA had recruited 30 Afghan agents, operating under the codename GE/SENIORS, “who had been paid to track bin Laden around Afghanistan for the last three years” (*Bush at War*, p. 6). This again raises the question as to why the US government was unable either to apprehend bin Laden or to disrupt his operations prior to September 11. It suggests that there were sections of the intelligence apparatus that still had relations with bin Laden—a former CIA ally in the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

CIA Director Tenet was to be the most aggressive proponent of responding to September 11 with military and paramilitary action in Afghanistan, according to Woodward’s book. He prevailed over Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, whose preferred target was Iraq, and who had ordered military plans drawn up for an invasion of Iraq well before September 11. Rumsfeld later complained that the US military intervention in Afghanistan was largely being run by the CIA, not the Pentagon.

Tenet obtained a presidential directive from Bush giving the CIA blanket authority for covert operations in Afghanistan and worldwide, including the assassination or kidnapping of alleged Al Qaeda operatives and supporters. In return, however, Tenet demanded Bush protect the agency from what he called “the failure blame game.” He warned Bush, according to Woodward, against “all kinds of finger-pointing and investigations like the endless rehashing of Pearl Harbor, trying to find a culprit, someone who had dropped the ball.” In other words, within hours of September 11, the CIA director was acting like a man with much to hide.

One of the most important facts cited by Woodward relates to the methods used by the United States to overthrow the Taliban regime. The conventional wisdom is that this was accomplished through a technological revolution in warfare, in which CIA and military spotters on the ground, using high-tech equipment, supplied target coordinates to Air Force and Navy pilots, making possible a bombing campaign of unprecedented accuracy and devastation.

There is an element of truth in this account, but it is vastly oversimplified. This distorted version of events has become the basis for suggestions that a US war against Iraq would be a similar low-casualty, quick-victory affair. Woodward's account reveals, however, that the conquest of Afghanistan was accomplished more by Mafia-style bribery and intimidation than by smart bombs.

CIA agents paid out \$70 million, most of it in stacks of \$100 bills, to buy the loyalty of thousands of local military commanders, tribal chiefs and regional warlords, persuading them to switch their allegiance from the Taliban to the opposition Northern Alliance. According to Woodward, the going rate was \$10,000 for a sub-commander heading several dozen fighters, and up to \$50,000 for the leader of several hundred fighters. A major share of these funds, \$10 million, was paid directly to Russian officials who supplied weapons to the Northern Alliance.

Those warlords who resisted bribery were targeted for smart-bomb demonstrations to convince them that their physical survival, as well as their future prosperity, depended on switching sides in the war. Woodward relates one incident that recalls nothing so much as the horse's head scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*:

"In one case, \$50,000 was offered to a commander to defect. Let me think about it, the commander said. So the Special Forces A-team directed a J-DAM precision bomb right outside the commander's headquarters. The next day they called the commander back. How about \$40,000? He accepted" (*Ibid.*, p. 299).

Another incident related by Woodward sheds light on the administration's policy of issuing warnings of imminent threats to targets within the United States, based on vague and unsubstantiated intelligence reports. He cites the Threat Matrix issued Friday, October 5, 2001, containing a report from a Defense Intelligence Agency source with the codename "Dragonfire," who claimed terrorists might have obtained a 10-kiloton nuclear weapon from the former Soviet Union and were headed for New York City. The Bush administration warned federal agencies, but decided not to inform state and local authorities in New York.

The report was inherently dubious because it falsified some technical details of the atomic weapon. Woodward writes: "It turned out that the source was a US citizen who said he had overheard some unidentified people discussing the possibility of a nuclear weapon in a Las Vegas casino. It was totally bogus" (*Ibid.*, p. 197).

Equally flimsy reports have been the basis for the arrest and indefinite detention without trial of Jose Padilla, a US citizen, and for the issuance of a series of alerts—usually triggered by the need to distract public attention—including the recent orange alert.

Vice President Richard Cheney cited a similar report about a possible attack on Washington with a radiological weapon to begin his sojourns at the famous "undisclosed, secure location" outside the capital city. According to Woodward, Cheney took the initiative, informing Bush of his decision after Bush expressed reservations. "He was not asking permission. He was going," Woodward writes (*ibid.*, p. 270).

What does come across in *Bush at War*, despite the author's evident intentions, is the impression of an administration nearly paralyzed by infighting among the principal officials, each seeking to influence a president who neither understands nor cares to understand complex problems, but relies instinctively on force and violence as an all-purpose solution.

After one meeting with top aides, Woodward writes: "Powell, for one, saw that Bush was tired of rhetoric. The president wanted to kill somebody" (*ibid.*, p. 53).

Later Woodward sums up Bush's approach: "The real gut calls in the presidency get down to when and where and how to use force—both covert action and military strikes, putting ordnance on target. There would be times the next day when Bush's advisers wondered if they would ever find a way to end the talking—to emerge from the sea of words and pull the

trigger" (*ibid.* p. 73).

Bush himself told Woodward, "I can only just go by my instincts." In conducting top-level meetings, he said, "I don't need to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation" (*ibid.* pp. 145-146).

Top officials like Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Powell and National Security Adviser Rice sought to frame their presentation of issues to obtain the proper "gut reaction" from Bush. They frequently used sports metaphors to communicate to a president whose principal executive experience was as part-owner and executive of the Texas Rangers baseball club.

Woodward recounts the following exchange, remarkable for its banality:

Later in a discussion with the president, Rice explained what she was trying to do with Rumsfeld. The CIA and the military had to be totally integrated on the ground. One person had to be running the show. It was a classic case of unity of command. It wasn't simply a handoff—passing the ball from the CIA to the military—because the CIA was going to stay and increase its presence. She and the president often spoke in sports analogies.

"Mr. President," she said, "you have to have a quarterback for this."

"Am I not the quarterback?" he asked.

"No, I think you're the coach." (*Ibid.*, pp. 245-246)

One method for dealing with the obvious inadequacy of the chief executive was to decide on policy beforehand, then present the alternatives to Bush in such a loaded fashion that his own "decision" was a foregone conclusion. Rice described this process to Woodward as an effort to avoid unnecessary arguments in front of the president. Or Bush could simply be kept out of the loop, as Cheney explained to the Principals Committee—a meeting of top officials excluding the president—when the discussion turned to the subject of paying bribes to Afghan warlords. Woodward writes:

Cheney seemed uneasy and indicated that he wanted to get the president away from such discussion, almost give him deniability. "The broad question of strategy needs to be decided by the president," Cheney said. "We will be judged by whether we get concrete results in Afghanistan. We need the PC to address the issue and then come to the president." The principals' committee was the proper place for this sort of tactical issue, and not in front of the president" (*ibid.*, p. 223).

Press accounts of Woodward's book have largely focused on the report that Roger Ailes, head of Fox News and former campaign adviser to Ronald Reagan, contacted the White House with advice on how to present its "war on terror" to the American public. That Fox is in league with the White House hardly comes as a revelation. But another anecdote underscores the sinister, anti-democratic character of the Bush administration. Woodward describes Bush's appearance at Yankee Stadium during the 2001 World Series:

"The president emerged wearing a New York Fire Department windbreaker. He raised his arm and gave a thumbs-up to the crowd on the third base side of the field. Probably 15,000 fans threw their arms in the air imitating the motion.

"He then threw a strike from the rubber, and the stadium erupted.

"Watching from owner George Steinbrenner's box, Karl Rove thought, It's like being at a Nazi rally" (*ibid.*, p. 277).

It is not clear whether Rove regarded this as praise or criticism, or whether he reflected on its political implications at all. The story is amazing only because of the fatuousness of Bush's alleged political mastermind, in relating it to Woodward. The *Post* journalist makes no comment himself on this devastating self-exposure.



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