

Charlie Wilson's War: Mike Nichols's pro-war film

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Directed by Mike Nichols, screenplay by Aaron Sorkin, based on the book by George Crile

In a secret CIA ceremony in the 1990s, a Democratic Party congressman from Texas is being honored for his role in delivering a “lethal body blow to Communism.” The agency is celebrating the “defeat and break-up of the Soviet Union”—one of the “great events of the 20th Century.”

So begins the new Mike Nichols movie, *Charlie Wilson's War*. Starring Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts and Philip Seymour Hoffman, the film bills itself as the real story of how in the 1980s, a hedonistic politician, Charlie Wilson (Hanks), conspires with an extreme right-wing Houston socialite, Joanne Herring (Roberts), and an untamed CIA agent, Gust Avrakotos (Hoffman), to conduct the largest US covert operation in history: the securing of money and weapons for the fight of the Afghan “freedom fighters” against the Soviet army.

As a comic, actor and filmmaker, Nichols has had a long career. His directorial reputation was established more than 40 years ago with films such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Graduate*. His latest film, saturated with ferocious anti-communism, is a defense of neo-colonialism and the right of American “democracy” to intervene wherever it likes around the globe. Its relatively minor amusements are like chocolate icing on a poisoned cake.

In Nichols's movie, Rep. Charlie Wilson attracts the attention of the flamboyant Joanne Herring, a wealthy Christian zealot. As someone who despises communism, she is Charlie's kind of woman. (George Crile's book on which the film is based, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times*, describes her as “a product of Texas oil and the John Birch Society.”)

Already interested in the goings-on in Afghanistan, Charlie gets recruited, via the bedroom, to Joanne's obsessive project of helping the Afghan mujahideen vanquish the Soviet forces. Charlie may be charming and amiable, but he is most useful because he sits on one of the subcommittees in the House that intersects with the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA. Joanne arranges an unofficial meeting between the congressman and her close personal friend, Pakistan's dictator General Zia-Ul-Haq.

Charlie's conspiratorial dealings with Zia are fruitful—and warm—despite the fact that the general has had his leading political opponent, former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, father of the recently assassinated Benazir Bhutto, killed off.

For Wilson, Afghanistan comes to symbolize the frontier of the Cold War and the Afghan Muslim fighters the essence of freedom and self-determination.

As a politician who doesn't play by the rules, Wilson is in serious danger of violating the federal Logan Act, which prohibits anyone other than the president and his representatives from engaging in foreign policy. He is an unrepentant womanizer who manages his Washington office and congressional responsibilities with a small army of attractive young

women (“Charlie's Angels” or “jailbait,” as he collectively addresses them). The buxom Angels are nonetheless smart enough to run interference when a government prosecutor—the current contender for the Republican presidential nomination, Rudolph Giuliani—starts pursuing Charlie on drug-related charges.

Frustrated by the hitherto low-grade clandestine CIA venture in Afghanistan, Charlie serendipitously hooks up with a disgruntled CIA spy, Gust Avrakotos, a fellow pathological Cold Warrior. (According to Crile, Gust “had taken to the Afghan program like a duck to water. There was nothing like killing communists to give him a sense of well-being. Just like Wilson, Avrakotos had felt something stir inside him the moment he met the Afghans. They were killers, and he understood these people. They wanted revenge. He wanted revenge.”)

Despite Charlie's professed sympathy for the plight of the Afghan people, the scenes that panoramically survey the vast refugee camps in the beleaguered country, as well as Wilson's interviews with war victims who report the horrors of the Soviet occupation, seem perfunctory and rushed through in order to get to more comic set-ups.

As a rule, Charlie, Gust and Joanne have a good deal of fun circumventing the law as they organize a CIA-funded Muslim jihad against the Soviet army. As it is imperative that no weapons be traced back to the US, the Texas congressman, as a long-time patron of the Zionist regime, commissions his Israeli contacts to construct a portable, multi-rocketed device dubbed the “Charlie Horse.”

While Wilson grows his war chest with congressional funds, both he and Gust covertly enlist the cooperation of Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, along with Israel, all united in their hostility to the USSR. Always the diplomatic innovator and iconoclast, “Good-Time Charlie” brings his own Texas belly dancer to Cairo to entertain the Egyptian defense minister.

Finally in 1989, the Soviet army marches across the Freedom Bridge and leaves Afghanistan.

There is little opportunity here to give the devil his due. Some of the scenes in Charlie's Capitol Hill quarters are amusing, as for example one in which he deals with a rich Christian blowhard who tries to get Wilson to support the placing of religious icons in public venues. In fact, and this is one of the elements that clearly must have made him an attractive subject for Nichols and Sorkin, Wilson had a reputation as a liberal in Texas business and political circles.

While Hanks is entertaining, he is not terribly convincing in the segments that take place on foreign soil. His comic abilities don't serve him well when more depth and understanding are required. The seductive Roberts and seedy Hoffman deliver flat performances, especially the latter, who impersonates rather than interprets. Although Nichols is legendary for his skill with actors, the problem is that in his latest work the performers are required to derive inspiration from a script that is untruthful and deliberately constrained.

It's a problem: how are actors to present truly reactionary sorts as intriguing and even progressive people? How is one to empathize with an

individual who includes a hated, brutal ruler as part of his inner circle? (According to Crile, when Pakistan's Zia was killed in a mysterious plane crash in 1988, a crushed Wilson lamented: "I have lost my father on this day.") And what about transforming a twisted, bloodthirsty CIA agent and a fundamentalist aristocrat into political role models? On the other hand, no effort is spared to portray the film's only Russian characters—two pilots who engage in banter as they prepare to shoot down Afghans—as heartless brutes.

It's difficult even for someone with Nichols's undoubted talents to reconcile the image of a nonconformist, good-hearted law-maker with that of a conspiratorial law-breaker whose actions have led to a nightmare for the Afghan (and American) people. Nichols ends his movie with a comment from Wilson on screen: "These things happened. They were glorious and they changed the world. And the people who deserved the credit are the ones who made the sacrifice. And then we f—ed up the endgame."

Is Nichols, through Wilson, inferring that today's disaster in Afghanistan, as well as the deadly path taken by the CIA-sponsored jihad resulting in September 11, might have been prevented had the US not abandoned the country after the departure of the Soviet Union?

In any event, as history, *Charlie Wilson's War* is a travesty. Nichols and his screenwriter, Aaron Sorkin (*A Few Good Men*, *The West Wing*), have made an effort to take advantage of the general low level of popular historical knowledge to transform an imperialist provocation into a fight for freedom.

The film ludicrously claims the US intervention in Afghanistan owes its origins to a hot tub in Las Vegas from which Wilson, playing around with strippers and call girls, sees a television broadcast of Dan Rather in the Middle Eastern country ("Dan Rather's wearing a turban; you don't want to know why?").

In its effort to lionize Charlie Wilson as the savior of the Afghan people, who are scarcely present, the film omits a few inconvenient facts. The maverick congressman came onto the scene well *after* the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter had decided to give financial and military support to the Islamicists engaged in guerilla warfare against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, which had come to power in a military coup in 1978. This *preceded* the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979.

The Carter regime, which hoped a war in Afghanistan would be the USSR's Vietnam, began funding and arming the most right-wing fundamentalists, the ideological ancestors of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden.

Nor does the film mention that Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan, was an enthusiastic promoter of the fundamentalists and that his CIA director, William Casey, is deserving of the title "founding father" of al Qaeda for his campaign of globally recruiting Islamic militants to come to Afghanistan to fight the anti-Communist cause. (Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski gloated in a 1998 interview that some "stirred-up Moslems" were a small price to pay for the collapse of the Soviet Union, the "liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War.")

Far from being an unsung champion as Nichols would have it, Wilson was a pawn on the global chessboard—a bagman for those responsible for nearly two decades of civil war and the destruction of Afghan society.

Chalmers Johnson—the well-known academic, one-time consultant to the CIA and author of *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*—has written a scathing review of both Crile's book and the Nichols movie.

According to Johnson, Tom Hanks, the film's co-producer, purchased the rights to the book and wanted a happy ending because he "just can't deal with this 9/11 thing." Joanne Herring, as Crile calls her, "the Christian godmother of the Muslim victory," threatened legal action if a first script was not sanitized. Nichols and scriptwriter Aaron Sorkin

allegedly caved in.

Johnson, who personally had dealings with Wilson, calls him a flagrant abuser of his position in government. He notes that Wilson received the CIA's first "honored colleague" award ever given to an outsider and points out that the politician went on to become a \$360,000-per-annum lobbyist for Pakistan.

Writes Johnson: "Neither a reader of Crile, nor a viewer of the film based on his book would know that, in talking about the Afghan freedom fighters of the 1980s, we are also talking about the militants of al Qaeda and the Taliban of the 1990s and 2000s."

Johnson adds that "there is ample evidence that, when it comes to the freedom of women, education levels, governmental services, relations among ethnic groups, and quality of life—all were infinitely better under the Afghan communists than under the Taliban *or* the present government of President Hamid Karzai, which evidently controls little beyond the country's capital, Kabul."

The unseriousness and dishonesty of the Nichols-Sorkin project are breathtaking. The film's publicists dreamt up this crude tagline: "*A stiff drink. A little mascara. A lot of nerve. Who said they couldn't bring down the Soviet empire?*"

Charlie Wilson's War is not simply a justification of the Afghan operation; it can be interpreted as a blank check for any present and future military action by the US.

As far as one can make out, Nichols is making an argument along these lines: Wilson was something of a disreputable figure, some of his associates were even worse, but, in the end, their collective effort resulted in a positive development. Life is unpredictable and contradictory that way.

As Nichols explained in an interview posted at *thedeadbolt.com*, he was drawn to the project by the unlikely manner in which people's liabilities, or elements of them, become assets: "And it is what finally draws you to most drama, which is that it's the unexpected things about people, in fact in life, even. The unexpected things that seem to be drawbacks that are somehow transformed into the better qualities."

This is sophistry. Reality is surprising, but only within certain limits. Not every unexpected outcome is possible. A pencil can't become a carrot. An operation that began as an illegal political provocation, aimed at advancing US geopolitical interests, couldn't be transformed into a struggle for any people's freedom.

Equally, the ongoing war in Iraq can't be separated from its criminal and predatory origins, concealed by massive lies.

The film makes clear that Nichols shares Wilson's anti-communism. He commented in the same interview mentioned above: "I have an *unreasoning prejudice* against any leader who kills and is responsible for the death of 15 million people. I'm just funny that way." The occupation of Afghanistan by the Stalinist bureaucracy was a reactionary maneuver, which only inflamed national sensibilities and provided the imperialists an opportunity for intervention, but Nichols identifies himself thoroughly with the American establishment and its predatory goals.

A brief note must be made of the response of most film critics to the movie. The general verdict was that it was political comedy, perhaps more of a "hoot" than it had the right to be. The majority expressed similar sentiments as those of the reviewer who called it a "welcome contrast to the plodding, somber earnestness of recent movies." The courageous *Rendition* is mentioned as being one such film. In its thumbs-up critique, one publication spelled it out: "It makes it easy to forget that this is the same rebellion that will eventually revert to Islamic fundamentalism and provide a proving ground for future terrorists in training." Indeed.



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