

REVISITED: Bob Woodward. *Obama's Wars*. New York, London, etc: Simon & Schuster, 2010. ISBN 978-14-39-17249-0. Pp. xviii, 441. Hardback. £28.00/ \$39.99. (Republished in 2011; 2014.)

Bob Woodward, the Washington Post investigative journalist most famous for his reporting of the Watergate scandal, takes on the difficult job of writing an incisive and intimate account of Barack Obama's first days in his presidency. As a key journalistic figure in Washington DC, Woodward uses his insights and contacts to interview a series of important figures for his book. Initially, the book seems to be a recounting of behind the scenes events in the White House, an overview without much substance. Nonetheless, with no detail being too trivial to be recounted, he manages to provide the reader with an introspective view into the meetings, memos and conversations Obama had when he first took office. The book is an intimate recollection of the White House decision-making processes, which shows more than just the tough decisions that come with the Presidency.

In *Obama's Wars*, Woodward portrays the considerate and detailed process of policymaking in Washington through the lens of his unique journalistic perspective. The author masterfully portrays how the young Illinois senator dealt with the challenging times U.S. foreign policy was going through. Woodward recollects at some point what Obama whispered when put in front of the complexities and intricacies of approaching the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. He said that the burden of taking on 'a world that could blow up any minute in half a dozen ways' was making him reconsider what it really means to be President. This was all coming from a candidate still in the electoral campaign mind-set and with little knowledge about the struggles his responsibilities as a leader would bring about. Woodward also looks into classified trips and meetings such as the one where Joe Biden and Lindsey Graham go to Pakistan to discuss the impediments to the operation from Pakistan's side. Moreover, the appointment of Mike Hayden as the new CIA director, the covert operations in Pakistan and the global fight against terrorism have all been analysed to find out if they had an influence on the management of the counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. By doing so, Woodward strives for the reader to have a strong understanding of the international political climate and its effects on the delicate and lengthy operation.

To convey his message, the author adopts a unique perspective through a remarkably well-researched chronology of events in Afghanistan and Iraq, providing the reader with the crucial details involved in these policy areas. Woodward succeeds in giving good context to the decisions Obama was facing at the moment and manages to captivate the reader's attention by surfacing key issues in the policy management of Afghanistan by the government and the military. Because of this, *Obama's Wars* is insightful in portraying the relationship between the military and the government.

This is particularly interesting in the case of Afghanistan where generals and decision-makers had different perspectives on the direction of the war. The military had a fairly positive perspective on the operation, one that was not supported by operational reality. The threat of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, together with the defective management of the operation, have highlighted serious impediments in the conduct of the war. Nonetheless, Woodward is successful at illustrating Obama's clear mind-set to end the war while being pressured by generals to send more resources in and heighten military activity. Fearful that this would be 'his Vietnam', the depiction of his decision-making process clearly highlights Obama's struggle. By doing so, Woodward offers more substance to Obama as a president and provides the reader with an authentic representation of his thought process and the challenges he had to face before taking the decision to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan and develop an exit plan.

Through his book, he contributes to the literature by offering an accurate account of Obama's challenges as the Commander-in-Chief at the beginning of his Presidency. With a unique style of writing, leaving no details behind, his book does not intend to be an empirical piece of research, but rather an exceptional description of the high-level classified documents, memos, and meetings between key stakeholders involved in Afghanistan. The book seems to be addressed to the wider public with a particular interest in the processes of policymaking and bargaining in the White House. One could perceive it as a close analysis of the young president, or as an in-depth investigation of what was preventing progress in Afghanistan. Drawing from Hamid Karzai's relationship with George W. Bush, the hectic and disorganised approach of the counterinsurgency operation, and Pakistan as a strategic in the fight against Al-Qaeda, he manages to identify the key issues of what is now known as 'Obama's war'.

Richard Adams has claimed that the overall result of the book is a 'notebook dump' as Woodward relies almost entirely on a series of recollections and interviews.³ His style takes away validity from his arguments and offers a rather callous analysis. With a series of ideas and opinions he does not guide the reader through his narrative. He offers a very familiar view of Washington and, in a world where 'partisan political considerations can regularly trump military decisions in a nation that is ostensibly at war, this only underscores the troubling question whether or not this war is perceptually, or actually, a matter of necessity for the nation'.⁴ By doing this he emphasises the scope of the war and the very root of the problem – US goals in Afghanistan. Did it just become another tool for politicians to play partisan politics or is there an end to it?

Woodward produced a comprehensive and insightful book on Obama's Presidency and the challenges he faced as the Commander-in-Chief in a crucial historical moment. The author's style leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions from the hawk eye view of a series of random and context lacking conversations. Despite limited analysis, he succeeded in presenting a solid and nuanced overview of Obama's first decisions as President.

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³ Richard Adams, 'Obama's Wars by Bob Woodward – review', in *The Guardian*, 9 October 2010, [online](#) (last accessed 20 January 2018).

⁴ Daniel D. Trifan, 'Review: Obama's Wars', in *E-International Relations*, 22 January 2013, [online](#) (last accessed 20 January 2018).