

Bob Woodward. *Obama's Wars: The Inside Story*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2010. 441pp.

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Long regarded as the doyen of White House journalism, Bob Woodward's latest book attempts to unravel the decisions that have shaped Barack Obama's strategy towards the war in Afghanistan. Although the book is written in carefully neutral prose and, in the words of the author, is "designed to present, as best my reporting could determine, what really happened" (xiii), *Obama's Wars* is more than just a dry recitation of meetings and White House intrigue. The principal story that *Obama's Wars* pursues is that of a negotiation between a neophyte Commander-in-Chief and a military establishment set on determining strategy for itself.

In terms of the Afghan side of the story, what Woodward's book demonstrates clearly is Obama's cast-iron determination to understand the full complexity of the situation, and to make sure that, whatever decision was reached, it was his decision and not one that he had been bounced into by his advisers, either civil or military:

As far as Obama was concerned, there were two times in recent history when a president faced major decisions on war – LBJ in 1965 when the Vietnam generals asked for escalation and 2003 when President Bush decided to invade Iraq. Both presidents had failed to drill down into the reasoning, the alternatives and the full consequence (158).

What comes across very strongly is the sense of a President trying to balance various priorities. On the one hand, there is a sense that Obama appreciates the need for the U.S. to win in Afghanistan; on the other is a sense that Afghanistan needs to be balanced against other national priorities. Woodward quotes Obama as stating: "This is neither counterinsurgency nor nation building. The costs are prohibitive" (325).

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On the other hand, the U.S. Military, in particular General Petraeus, sees Afghanistan not as *a* national priority but as *the* national priority. It is very clear that Petraeus and the commander on the ground, General Stanley McChrystal's, preferred strategy would be the kind of full-blown counterinsurgency that Obama rules out on the grounds of cost. From the point of view of Petraeus and the Military, Afghanistan is simply part of a larger struggle to secure the American homeland by denying groups like Al-Qaeda access to ungoverned spaces like Afghanistan. Woodward has Petraeus stating that, "I don't think you win this war. I think you keep fighting ... This is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives" (332).

Obama's Wars is at its best when it is dissecting this tension between the President who, whilst they may be Commander-in-Chief, has the responsibility to try and find a balance between competing national priorities and, on the other hand, the Military which, by necessity and design, is single-mindedly focused on warfare. In line with all of Woodward's recent work, his level of access to policymakers and documents and records of meetings is superb, and the narrative is often enlivened by a pithy and occasionally catty quote from anonymous administration officials. For example, Woodward's memorable description of how CIA director Michael Hayden found out he was being replaced:

Hayden read an online *Washington Post* story confirming the rumors he had heard the day before about [current CIA director Leon] Panetta succeeding him as CIA director. "Rahm Emanuel's goombah," he said in disgust. Being replaced by a politico was a personal humiliation, as was learning about it from a newspaper (59).

However, this great strength of Woodward's writing is also ultimately its Achilles heel. *Obama's Wars* is focused exclusively on the inside of the Beltway policymaking intrigue between high officials in the Obama Administration. There is no serious attempt by Woodward to independently assess the impact on the ground of all of these high-level machinations. Nor is there any attempt really to place the byplay between Obama as Commander-in-Chief and the Military in any kind of historical context. The kind of dispute that Woodward describes would be familiar to any scholar of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, or Dwight Eisenhower's running battles with his chiefs over

military budget or even Lincoln's relationship with the Military, but there is no attempt to place Obama's struggle in that context. Also, there is the grating assumption that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are just organisations passively waiting to respond to U.S. policy rather than independent actors in their own right. Ultimately, *Obama's Wars* is merely a snapshot of one part of a much larger picture, but it is a snapshot which has been taken in great detail. Ultimately, *Obama's Wars* is a snapshot of one part of a larger picture but taken in great detail.