Review - Obama's Wars

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Obama's Wars
By: Bob Woodward
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010

Even a brief examination of Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars* reveals a meticulously and exhaustively researched chronological account of the Obama administration's travails in regard to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from the moment of then-Senator Obama's election victory in late 2008 to the summer of 2010. One of the premier investigative journalists in America over the last four decades, Mr. Woodward displays a thorough familiarity with the way Washington works, and portrays the new president as cerebral, measured, and thoughtful as he takes over the responsibility for the wars bequeathed to him by his predecessor, George W. Bush. At the same time, though, the frequent differences of opinion between the president and the professional military establishment sound disturbingly familiar, variations on a theme first articulated during the Vietnam War, and born from a need to appear to be winning even as victory appears more and more elusive.

The more deeply one examines this masterfully told story, the more disturbing it becomes. President Obama and his national security team were fully aware of the less than encouraging facts of the war in Afghanistan, a war that the

Bush administration relegated to the back burner as the former president and his team pursued nation-building in Iraq with plenty of energy and dollars, yet with a degree of optimism that was increasingly untethered to Iraqi reality. Once the American mission in Iraq was refocused with an emphasis on transferring security responsibility to the Iraqi army and police force during Bush's second term, thanks to a fairly effective counterinsurgency policy, Afghanistan had become much the same place it had been in 2002, with the majority of the country controlled by the Taliban or locally powerful warlords. While Hamid Karzai was officially Afghanistan's president, his writ extended primarily to the capital city of Kabul, and not much further.

While Iraq was a creation of the early twentieth century, of post-Versailles Conference nation-building in the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, it had a greater degree of national consciousness in the beginning of the twenty-first century than did Afghanistan, which had been recognized as a nation for centuries without ever really having been one. In many ways, Afghanistan was a nation in name only, a tribal and ethnic conglomeration consisting of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Baluchis, and Hazaras, with frequent splits among these groups, particularly the Pashtuns. Unlike in Iraq, the American mission in Afghanistan did not include nation-building, a wise course of action considering that the last foreign leader to impose a degree of order on this region, albeit briefly, was Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC.

While the American mission in Afghanistan was to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven, as Mr. Woodward explains, this policy contained many ancillary problems. The first was the Taliban, a homegrown Islamist faction that had first appeared during the struggle against the Russians in the 1980s. In the chaos following the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, the Taliban, dominated by ethnic Pashtuns from the region of Kandahar, emerged as the dominant faction by 2001, with the assassination of the preeminent guerrilla fighter against the Russians, the Tajik Ahmed Shah Masud, on September 10, 2001. This assassination had been carried out by Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, as a favor to Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

Following the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center by bin Laden's suicide bombers on September 11, 2001, President Bush's initial campaign against al-Qaeda and their Taliban supporters in early 2002 had been brief and violent, but had not succeeded in capturing bin Laden or other prominent al-Qaeda leaders, who instead escaped to western Pakistan's autonomous tribal region, known as Waziristan.

The second of these ancillary problems was the ambivalent position of Pakistan. Following the assassination of the popular former president Benazir Bhutto by the Taliban, Pakistan had become a nation governed by a triumvirate of forces rather than individuals: the government, led by Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari; the army, led by the charismatic and influential General Ashfaq Kayani; and the security services, known as the ISI. While the ISI clandestinely supported the Taliban in Afghanistan, fearing that Karzai was too supportive of India, the ineffectual Zardari assured the US that Pakistan was their ally in the global war on terror. The balance was effectively maintained by General Kayani, who pursued both policies simultaneously. The problem for the US was that all three forces pursued a hands-off policy toward Waziristan, which now became an effective safe haven for the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies.

The third problem was Hamid Karzai, whose regime was riddled with nepotism, cronyism, and corruption. The first meeting between Karzai and Vice President Joe Biden did not go well, according to Woodward, for as Biden and Senator Lindsey Graham pressed Karzai for greater cooperation, Karzai complained about collateral damage to Afghan civilians in American raids against the Taliban and insisted on prior notification of American operations. Both Biden and Graham regarded Karzai's regime as a liability rather than an asset, and Graham bluntly informed Obama that the US was losing the war in Afghanistan.

A general consensus already existed among the military and civilian officials responsible for waging the Afghan war that the US was not losing, but wasn't winning either. While some voiced more pessimistic appraisals privately, as Woodward explains, this less than encouraging scenario began to drive policy decisions, since for the US to lose in Afghanistan was not acceptable for political reasons. In many ways, this is the most disturbing of Woodward's revelations, since it indicates how poorly the lessons of the Vietnam War had been learned after more than four decades. There also, since defeat was unacceptable, after a drastic escalation in the mid-1960s had not yielded

decisive results, the Johnson and Nixon administrations were trapped between increasing American troop strength and rapidly declining voter enthusiasm for such escalation, resulting in a plethora of politically driven military strategies whose only consistency was their ineffectiveness in achieving any realistic measure of victory. As a result, victory had to be redefined, with transfer of the fighting mission to the South Vietnamese and consequent American disengagement now becoming the benchmark for success.

During 2009 and early 2010, as Woodward recounts the endless negotiations between the civilians and the generals over counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, force structure, and the individual input of various power centers such as Obama's White House advisers, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council, theater commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal, and Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus, many of these same factors appeared during these negotiations. Should the US implement a broad-based counterinsurgency policy, as had been done in Iraq, as General Petraeus advocated, or should there be a limited counterinsurgency blended with a counterterrorism emphasis? This would depend on whether the US's principal objective remained the defeat of al-Qaeda, or expanded to include the defeat of the Taliban, which would require at the least a fully funded and staffed counterinsurgency. This expansion of the mission was recommended in the Pentagon's Strategic Implementation Plan in the late summer of 2009, and was agreed to by both McChrystal and Petraeus, but with only a limited increase in the force structure. But the repeated requests for more troops were beginning to wear on Obama, and the president was rapidly losing patience with the generals, particularly Petraeus, who were trying to force his hand on troop increases, while they were not able to articulate clearly what American interests in Afghanistan actually were.

Following months of contentious negotiations over troop increases, the pace of said increases, the number of said increases, all the while receiving nothing but bad news from Afghanistan, an exasperated Obama finally laid out his decision in writing: a surge of 30,000 troops would be used, the mission was to "degrade and disrupt," not defeat, the Taliban, and that a drawdown of American forces in Afghanistan would begin in July 2011. The president made clear that the only factor still to be decided was the pace of this drawdown. The responsibility for the war would be gradually transferred to the Afghan army and security forces.

The one encouraging feature was the counterterrorism policy, centering around vastly expanded drone strikes and attacks by special operations troops, both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. These strikes had apparently severely damaged al-Qaeda's operational capability, and gave the administration hope that the core of the American mission could still be achieved.

This was the only bright spot, though: everywhere else the news was bad or worse. The official policy in Afghanistan was for American forces to "clear, hold, and transfer," but months into the operation not a single region had been transferred to Afghan forces, since they were in no way ready for such a responsibility. The Karzai regime seemed perfectly content to let the Americans fight the Taliban, and reports of corruption continued unabated. The ambivalent and contradictory policy of the Pakistani government remained fundamentally unchanged, although President Zardari was a bit more accepting of American operations within his borders.

In this superb book's final chapter, Woodward had a conversation with Obama about the situation in 2010, and at one point the president observed that Woodward seemed to have better sources of information than he had. While this remark was delivered jovially, it is an easy thing to believe after having read this meticulously researched study. Woodward appears to know virtually everyone of importance in Washington, and has a remarkable ability to elicit illustrative and supportive detail from his interviewees. One wishes only that Woodward's story didn't seem so familiar, for 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.

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