

Inside the Anglo-Saxon War Machine

Written by Matt Cavanagh

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MATT CAVANAGH, NOV 23 2010

Obama's Wars, the veteran US reporter Bob Woodward's book on the Afghan conflict, has many flaws. It is overlong, repetitious, and lacks structure, leading some critics to dismiss it as a "notebook dump." It is insular, mentioning the Afghans only in passing, and Britain and other allies hardly at all. It lacks any feel for the conflict itself, and Woodward has been mocked for writing about an overnight stay in a vast US base as if it was the front line. Yet it is also an invaluable guide to the political processes behind modern warfare.

Part of the problem is the book's title. For this is a book not about war, but about the workings of the national security machinery: the mix of politicians, political advisers, security officials, generals and admirals who take decisions about war in a modern democracy. Woodward has talked to most of them, and they have been remarkably open with him, even indiscreet. The book's real value, however, lies not in the indiscretions or particular revelations, but in the laborious and painstaking way that it charts the decision-making process through the course of 2009, as the president, his advisers and the senior military agonise about the way ahead.

Here, the book's lack of structure is a virtue. The absence of an overarching "narrative" allows the cast to put their case in as unfiltered a manner as a reader is likely to find. As with any insider account, Woodward overemphasises those who give him the most time or the best quotes. But while some critics have perceived a bias towards the White House, and others a bias towards the military, I found it hard to discern either. If anything, Woodward is overly credulous of every powerful player he encounters—but it is this that allows them the chance to put their case.

The result is a gruelling but fascinating read for anyone who is interested in how such decisions are made, not just in America but more widely. And it would be a shame if the book's insularity put British readers off. This is a book about the British experience too, for essentially the same internal debate played out here over the same period, with the same camps in the same positions—and the same result.

Of course, there are differences. In the British debate, a great deal of time and effort went into working out what the was not true. It would be unfair to blame this entirely on American insularity. However important our decisions were to us in Britain, they mattered far less in strategic terms, as a glance at the numbers shows. Obama sent 20,000 more troops to Afghanistan early in 2009, and spent the second half of the year debating whether to send another 40,000, while Gordon Brown and his generals were arguing over 1,000: one per cent of the international force.

The shape and tone of the debates in Washington and Whitehall also reflected the differing personal styles of the two leaders: Obama relaxed and confident, comfortable in group discussion; Brown preferring one-to-one conversations, closed and brooding to those outside his circle. He was not helped by his last two defence secretaries, who simply echoed the military, whereas Robert Gates, their American counterpart, at least tried to play the role of bridging the military and political camps. On the other hand, Brown's foreign secretary, David Miliband—unlike his counterpart Hillary Clinton—was a potential ally, sharing his leader's scepticism of military escalation. Unfortunately the two men were so far apart in all other matters that this was less helpful than it might have been.

There was no British equivalent to Vice-President Joe Biden, who is teased in the book for his grandstanding and verbosity, but who the record will show asking the right questions, acting as a useful support and foil to his president.

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There was also no British equivalent to the generals on Obama's team. Brown's advisers (of whom I was one) proposed appointing one, but this was blocked by the military and the civil service. This was something I reflected on as I read Woodward's accounts of General Jones, Obama's national security adviser, squaring up to his fellow generals in the National Security Council or reprimanding them for their media outings; of the low-key but effective General Lute, the "war czar" in the West Wing basement, marking the Pentagon's homework; and of Colin Powell coming in for a friendly chat with Obama in the midst of the crisis. "You don't have to put up with this," said Powell, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "These guys work for you. Because they're unanimous in their advice doesn't make it right."

Another difference is that, in the American debate, the sceptics continually raised the issue of cost, asking whether it could be justified relative to competing claims on the straitened public finances. In the British debate, cost was hardly mentioned. Brown and his advisers were concerned that if they raised it, this would leak, and would be seen as vindicating the campaign by the Conservatives and the right-wing media to imply that Brown was withholding funding from the military in Afghanistan—and therefore was personally responsible for individual military deaths.

There is some irony in the fact that, at a time when the principal right-wing critique of Brown was that he was recklessly spending money the country did not have, these same critics took the opposite stance when faced with an area in which spending was indeed increasing steeply to questionable effect. The more serious point is that what should have been a legitimate consideration in internal debate was, in effect, silenced.

Overall, the similarities between Britain and America's leaders are more striking than the differences. Obama and Brown were both reluctant warriors. Afghanistan was a war they inherited, and at first underestimated—defining their position on it more by contrast to Iraq than on its merits. They realised soon enough that it was going badly. Casualties and costs were rising steadily, the progress on development since 2001 was stalling and being overtaken by corruption, and public support at home was ebbing away. They probed deeper into the detail: "getting into the weeds," the military called it. But the two leaders felt they had no choice, unable to trust the military to get the detail right.

Perceptions aside, the serious point is that both leaders felt boxed in by the military and ended up conceding more than they would have wanted. If this had happened only in Britain, we might have concluded that it showed nothing more than Brown's political weakness in 2009. We could have speculated that the outcome might have been different if he had been politically stronger, or more confident or inclusive; if he had empowered the sceptical voices on his side, or co-opted some generals onto his team.

Woodward's book suggests otherwise: that while this would have evened up the debate and made Brown feel less isolated both internally and in the media, it probably wouldn't have produced a different result. Obama, who was in a far stronger position, still felt he couldn't afford a full-scale confrontation with the senior military. Maybe—unlike Brown—he could have won, but the cost would still have been too great.

I suspect also that the military have passed the peak of their power. Obama's July 2011 decision-point is likely to test not just who is winning in Afghanistan, but who really won back in Washington in 2009: whether Obama succeeded in asserting civilian control, or whether Petraeus got what he wanted while Obama just got to save face. The gap between the politicians and military remains as wide as it was in 2009. Casualty figures among both international forces and Afghan civilians have continued to rise. Crucial operations in Helmand and Kandahar are proving slower and more difficult than planned, and the security situation in other parts of the country continues to deteriorate. The only metric which is on track is the growth of the Afghan army, but even here there are concerns about quality and retention; the police, meanwhile, are as bad as ever. Neither the Taliban nor President Karzai seem serious about reconciliation. Karzai's government is mired in accusations of corruption, and the Pakistanis continue to play both sides—as they have done for decades.

Matt Cavanagh was a special adviser to Gordon Brown from 2007-2010, and to Defence Secretary Des Browne from 2006-2007

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