

Bushed About The Facts

Bob Woodward is a darling of investigative journalism, but his study of the Bush White House falls way short, writes Ahmed Rashid. *Bush At War*, by Bob Woodward. Simon and Schuster \$28

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By Ahmed Rashid

Nobody contradicts or corrects President George W. Bush. And certainly not Bob Woodward. So when, according to the notes of cabinet meetings that have been handed over to Woodward and which form the core of *Bush at War*, the president makes mistake after mistake in deciphering the day-to-day moves by the U.S. military and the Northern Alliance during last year's war in Afghanistan, it appears that none of the principals in the U.S. government has the courage to correct him.

It seems, therefore, that Woodward is either so obligated to Bush or so completely ignorant about the geography, history and politics of Afghanistan and Central Asia that he doesn't dare correct him either. Since he achieved fame for his reporting on Watergate, Woodward has become the court historian of successive U.S. presidencies. His books have become best sellers because he has been given unprecedented access by American leaders to their notes and private thoughts.

His earlier books placed these revelations in some kind of historical context of U.S. policymaking, and Woodward retained his credibility as a journalist by offering some degree of independent analysis of what he was hearing and the events he was covering.

In *Bush at War*, however, Woodward declines to give any kind of context to the decision-making process in the White House immediately after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. The result is that it's as though the monumental policy and intelligence failures that day, and subsequent policy decisions pursued by the Bush administration, exist in a vacuum and require no analysis, no explanation of the past and present and no discussion of the impact of those decisions.

Woodward seems determined to avoid embarrassing his friends in high places. He becomes the classic priestly note-taker for medieval kings and emperors--there to record their words of wisdom and folly, but to offer no comment of his own to decipher their worth or significance and no analysis of how their decisions fit into the matrix of what has gone before or what could follow.

Not once in 372 pages does Woodward criticize any of the principals. Nor does he dare to evaluate their performance, the worth of their opinions or their significance in the decision-making process. No presidential court could ask for a better courtier than Woodward.

Even the intense differences between Secretary of State Colin Powell and the hardliners in the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency (even more evident in the handling of U.S. policy toward Iraq) are watered down to an embarrassing extent--embarrassing, that is, for Woodward's credibility. Major decisions and events that proved to be disastrous, such as the U.S. special forces' raid by parachute on an airfield in southern Afghanistan during the bombing campaign in mid-October, are glossed over by Woodward as "largely demonstration raids, orchestrated to show capability and gather intelligence." The fact that a major internal enquiry was launched into the failure of the raid, and that such raids were never repeated, is not mentioned.

Doubtless when Bush runs for re-election, his spin masters will use this book to demonstrate the forceful and powerful intellect that Bush commands, his heroic and decisive powers of decision-making and how his team is constantly in awe of him, even as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice acts as the keeper of the president's intellectual flame.

That is not to say the book is not worth reading. Everyone in Washington is reading it and doubtless this is true in every corridor in every centre of power in the world. Everyone wants to know what the president said and did in the aftermath of September 11. Even if not very illuminating, the book is certainly titillating--a kind of Hello! magazine for the rich and powerful. In this day and age of celebrity culture it is a major journalistic

coup to have access to the actual words of the most powerful man on earth, no matter how banal they may be.

The book confirms the confusion in the White House as the campaign in Afghanistan began. As the bombing campaign in Afghanistan flounders and the press start accusing the administration's strategy of being stuck in a quagmire, there is clearly a feeling of doubt and depression in the White House. Woodward clearly illustrates that. Then when Mazar-e-Sharif unexpectedly falls and the Taliban rout begins, Woodward joins in with Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld to mock his fellow journalists for daring to question U.S. strategy.

Woodward also gives us a front-row seat in showing how the White House forged its global alliance against terrorism, and in particular how swiftly the U.S. was able to win support from Afghanistan's neighbours for allowing U.S. bases to be located on their territory. Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf jumps on board without a moment's thought, while Uzbekistan procrastinates as it tries to extract the maximum concessions from Washington.

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