

## *Review Article*

# **Bush at War: Decision-Making in Washington**

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Bob Woodward, Assistant Managing Editor of the influential *The Washington Post*, has come up with his second book on an American presidency led by a member of the Bush family, *Bush at War*.<sup>1</sup> Bob Woodward's first book on a Bush presidency is *The Commanders*.<sup>2</sup> This is an account of U.S. military decision-making during the first 800 days of the presidency of George Bush from November 8, 1988, when he was elected President, through January 16, 1991, the beginning of the first Gulf War. Convinced that the end of the Cold War would usher in a quiet period for the U.S. military, Woodward initially wanted *The Commanders* to focus on the intricacies of the U.S. military in peace time. But the Panama invasion of December 1989 and the 1990 Gulf Crisis changed all that. Deviating from his original intention, Bob Woodward ended up writing about the U.S. military decision-making during those military operations. However, *The Commanders* is not all about military decision-making either. Woodward's analysis showed that the Pentagon was not always the centre of military decision-making process; during the first Gulf Crisis, the White House ran the show.

Unlike his *The Commanders* and *All the President's Men*, published in 1974, which exposed and analysed the role of the White House in the Watergate scandal that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1973, *Bush at War*, essentially deals with a foreign policy

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issue – the workings of the Bush administration’s war cabinet while it dealt with the administration’s response to the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and the U.S. Defence Department (popularly known as the Pentagon) in Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001. In this useful book for the students of U.S. foreign policy, Bob Woodward analyses the roles played by President George W. Bush and other actors – dubbed as the “principals” by Woodward – in deciding to launch a military assault on Afghanistan in October 2001 as a direct response to the events of 9/11.

### **The Data and the Approach**

Woodward, in his own words, uses “contemporaneous notes taken during the more than 50 National Security Council and other meetings where the most important decisions were discussed and made.” How did Woodward manage to get these secret documents from an administration which follows a policy of “information discipline” and threatens to send anybody to jail for leaking information? Why is Bob Woodward not in jail for revealing the deepest secrets of the Bush administration? The answer may either be that some classified information deserves more protection than others or perhaps the only leakers who are traitors are those who betray the administration.<sup>3</sup>

In this book, Woodward makes an effort to bring the thoughts, and reactions of America’s top decision-makers involved in deciding the American response to the events of 9/11, which had taken them completely by surprise. Although a national best-seller in the U.S., *Bush at War* is not a path-breaking scholarly piece of work. It is not in the same league as that of Graham T. Allison’s *The Essence of Decision: The Cuban Missile Crisis*. Allison uses rational theory to painstakingly analyse the role of the Executive Committee (“the Ex-Com”) in coming up with the Kennedy administration’s policy on getting the Soviet medium-range missiles from Cuba in 1962. Woodward, however, has not used meaningfully, the excerpts from documents and minutes of meetings of the War Cabinet and the National Security Council, to develop a scientific framework to explain Bush’s policy-making to deal with the events of September 11. The book sometimes presents incisive accounts of the U.S. foreign policy decision-making process in the United States over

the 9/11 events. However, generally, Bob Woodward ends up documenting “who said what” and “what transpired in the meetings.”

### **The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**

The book, however, underlines differences among some members of the conservatives in power in Washington – President George W. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Attorney General John Ashcroft, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. Bob Woodward manages to highlight the cause of the intense tension between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Woodward highlights a number of issues dividing them. In various meetings of the war cabinet, Colin Powell proposed the publication of a government White Paper containing the evidence supporting al-Qaeda’s involvement in the attacks of September 11. This was designed to convince those who had opposed any American military attack on Afghanistan. The aim of this perhaps also was to strengthen the hands of governments, such as of Pakistan and Uzbekistan, whose support was of crucial importance for any American military campaign in Afghanistan. He was also of the opinion that more needed to be done to build a coalition to launch the military attack on Afghanistan. However, he opposed the idea of launching a simultaneous military attack on Iraq.

Cheney and Rumsfeld expressed their opposition to Powell’s suggestions on releasing more information to the public on al-Qaeda’s involvement in 9/11 events. They believed that there was no need to do more to convince the world’s public opinion as enough information was already provided on al-Qaeda’s involvement in the 9/11 events. In the end, neither side could claim complete victory on their positions on this issue. Bush himself was in favour of “information discipline” and, therefore, a policy was adopted to provide evidence of al-Qaeda’s involvement only to the elite of the countries considered vital to carry out the military attack on Afghanistan. In addition to providing the evidence, Washington also provided generous economic assistance to such countries like Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

Ultimately, a decision was taken to coordinate efforts to win the support of the countries in Middle East and Central Asia by providing them with the evidence of the involvement of al-Qaeda in the September bombings. President Bush had strong reservations about making a simultaneous military attack on Iraq. He believed that the administration did not have enough evidence of Iraq's involvement in the September attacks. President Bush was also concerned that it would be a risk to carry out two military operations at the same time. According to Woodward, Bush was uneasy with the fact that Cheney and Rumsfeld might try to settle old scores with President Saddam Hussein by pushing for a policy of launching a simultaneous military attack on Iraq. Bush ended the debate on Iraq by sending a message to the war cabinet that he had heard enough debate over Iraq. That was a signal to the members of the war cabinet that the President was not in favour of launching a simultaneous military attack on Iraq.

The Powell-Rumsfeld differences demonstrate a fault line dividing the "traditional" and the "neo-conservatives" in Washington. Both groups view existing international law as providing the nation states with the right of "anticipatory pre-emptive" attacks on other states. The difference between the two, however, rests on the tactic rather than the strategy. Rumsfeld and Cheney believed that the U.S. should act alone in launching any pre-emptive strikes. Powell, on other hand, was in favour of building a U.S.-led coalition to deal with "rogue regimes." Following the publication of this book, appearing on CNN's *The Larry King Show*, Donald Rumsfeld had commented that he needed to re-think serving President Bush's second administration after the 2004 presidential elections. Many think Rumsfeld's statement was due to his differences with Powell during the Afghan policy-making days.

### **The Ignorant Few**

*Bush at War* deals with the first war of the Bush administration, the war on Afghanistan; the second one was on Iraq, which ended with the entry of U.S. marines into Baghdad on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2003. As the only superpower in the world, the U.S. displays an impressive array of technology to help its military campaigns: the global positioning system (GPS), precision bombs, the B-1 stealth bomber, the

Tomahawk cruise missiles, the capability to eavesdrop on phone calls and monitor e-mail, and fax, and the ability to control electronic channels. However, equally unfortunate and awful is how some members of the war cabinet lacked basic knowledge about some essential facts about Afghanistan – the country they were preparing to attack militarily. Ahmed Rashid points out the following glaring shortcomings of the “principals” and their “chief” President George Bush about the country they were about to attack:<sup>4</sup>

- While planning the war, Bush mistakenly placed Konduz in the west, instead of north-east of Afghanistan.
- Some CIA officials, while talking about the impact of winter on the fighting in Afghanistan, were sure that it would slow down the fighting in the Panjshir Valley and not in the Shomali Plains. Actually, the Panjshir Valley was already in the Northern Alliance’s control. Moreover, US Special Forces were deployed there to assist the Northern Alliance forces. Therefore, there was to be no fighting in the Panjshir Valley.
- When Bush’s war cabinet was engaged in a debate over the issue of whether to allow the Northern Alliance troops to enter Kabul, the President is quoted to have remarked that they could be based outside and then allowed to conduct missions “on the inside.” As Ahmed Rashid so emphatically points out, the problem was the Northern Alliance had no troops inside.
- Not to be outdone in providing input into the debate, a CIA official suggested a policy whereby troops of the Northern Alliance was to be based outside Kabul, while the Pushtuns would be brought by the US into Kabul. There was no anti-Taliban Pushtuns in the area for 300 miles.

### **The Decision-Making Model**

The President plays the key role in foreign-policy decision-making process of the United States. The process, however, is determined not by the office but by the holder of the office. If anything, the history of the American foreign policy-making reveals that no president had ever occupied the office with a pre-determined model for policy-making. Each one developed his own way of making foreign-policy decisions. But faced with crisis, all of them turned either to cabinet colleagues or close friends for information and advice. However, they did not follow a single common model in

getting the advice. There were presidents who took the information and assigned tasks through an orderly, hierarchical structure (Eisenhower named the first chief of staff), and those who position themselves at the centre of converging spokes of counsel (Clinton).<sup>5</sup>

How did Bush shape the foreign policy-making process of the U.S. in dealing with Afghan issue? Bob Woodward's present work supports the main conclusions of Richard Brookhiser.<sup>6</sup> He admits that George W. Bush is not an easy man to write about. He is not contradictory, not flamboyant, and not well-spoken. He also observes that nothing reveals a man's mind, especially the mind of a man who cannot articulate better than the decisions he makes. Brookhiser identifies the following factors, which Bush pays attention to:

- Thriftiness with time
- The team
- Questioning and Learning
- Instinct
- Providence
- Follow-through

During the decision-making process over Afghanistan, President Bush kept the time under control, never allowing his cabinet members to procrastinate on issues like the idea of launching a simultaneous military assault on Iraq. In fact, Bush was obsessed with "getting on" with the job and insisted that all necessary information, policy-papers and policy alternatives be submitted to him on time.

Bush, according to Woodward, is a team player. A point also made by Brookhiser. However, George W. Bush does not let other members of the team forget who is really in charge. When Vice-President came up with the idea that a war cabinet be formed under his leadership to advice the President on policy alternatives, Bush shot down the idea. He never allowed the members of the War Cabinet to drag on issues such as whether to launch a simultaneous attack on Iraq.

Bush requires information, and he does it by questioning and listening to the explanations provided by the staff. Bush describes

himself as an instinctive decision-maker. In an interview with Woodward for his *Bush at War*, the president told the author, "I'm not a textbook player: I'm a gut player." Brookhiser describes this as "a rationalisation, a cover for his lack of more obvious qualifications, such as intellect conventionally measured."<sup>7</sup>

It is his instinctive trait which led him to launch the war on Afghanistan. Within hours of the attack, talking from Air Force One, a very angry President Bush told his Vice-President on the phone, "We are at war." Some of the staff on Air Force One heard Bush say to Cheney, "That's what we are paid for boys. We're going to take care of this. And when we find out who did this, they're not going to like me as president. Somebody is going to pay." The president further told the Vice-President, "We're going to find out who did this and we're going to kick their asses." Perhaps Bush would be the only president in the history of the United States who had decided to go to war without consulting the Congress and the people.

Bush's instinctive nature sometimes caused embarrassment for American officials. Once he remarked, "This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while." His comment outraged Muslims all over the world as Bush's statement reminded them of the invading Christians during the medieval period. Later Bush's aides tendered apology. On another occasion a reporter asked Bush, "Do you want bin Laden dead?" He replied "There's an old poster out West, as I recall, that said, 'Wanted Dead or Alive.'" This comment cemented in the minds of people of Bush as a "Texan Cowboy" bent on going after his enemy with guns blazing.

### **The Bush Foreign Policy**

The Bush administration came into power convinced that American foreign policy would be based on "unilateralism" thus "reversing the American internationalist commitment that came out of the Second World War and that lasted throughout the 45 years of the Cold War."<sup>8</sup> The policy of unilateralism, according to the Republicans, is a natural policy option for Washington since the international structure is now unipolar, the United States being the sole super power. In the eyes of the decision-makers in Washington, the terrorist attacks of September 11 perhaps justify the U.S. policy

of “unilateralism.” However, as Woodward seems to suggest in his book, those events are not the cause of Washington’s policies of “unilateralism” and “the doctrine of pre-emptive strike.” There is enough evidence to suggest that well before the September 11 attacks the U.S. had already started to implement the policy of “unilateralism.” For example, as soon as it assumed power in Washington, the Bush administration had begun to dismantle or reject treaties that would bind the United States to a larger international community. Washington rejected the Kyoto Protocol to curb the emission of noxious gases in the atmosphere, withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, scuttled the land Mine Treaty, and refused to back the International Criminal Court.<sup>9</sup>

President Bush’s role is just one of the factors contributing to the policy of the war on Afghanistan. His close cabinet colleagues – Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, John Ashcroft – and his Condoleezza Rice, all contributed to the shaping of Bush’s policy on Afghanistan. Long before President Bush took over power in Washington, his advisers had been lecturing and writing on the foreign policy of the Bush administration. Woodward in his book has paid scanty attention to this important source which would explain the influence of some of these people on George W. Bush and account for the “imperial policy” of the Bush administration. One such person is Condoleezza Rice, President Bush’s national security adviser. Before taking up her present position she worked as Bush’s foreign policy adviser during his campaign as a presidential candidate. Rice was also a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and a Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. She served the George Bush administration as a Soviet expert on the National Security Council.

In an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, she outlined the foreign policy of a future Republican administration in Washington.<sup>10</sup> In it, in a frank and candid fashion, she emphasised that the George W. Bush’s administration must begin outlining a new foreign policy with the understanding that the United States was in a remarkable position. With this realisation the new Washington government was “to ensure that America’s military could deter war, project power, and fight in defence of its interests if deterrence fails.” What does it mean to deter, fight, and win wars and defend the U.S. national



interest? Condoleezza Rice provides the answer. The American military must be able to meet decisively the emergence of any hostile military power in the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and Europe.<sup>12</sup> Although, in her article Rice does not argue for the adoption of the policy of pre-emptive strike, she very vigorously made a case for the use of military power to protect America's national interest.<sup>13</sup> Rice views the role of the president's national security adviser as a "gatekeeper." As such, she not only advises the President whenever asked to do so, but more importantly, she is in a unique position to monitor the flow of information to and from the president. Woodward missed a wonderful opportunity to make an in-depth analysis of her influence in the Afghan policy-making.

### Conclusion

Despite some shortcomings, *Bush at War* will be paid close attention to by power elites of states – friends or foes alike of the U.S. This is a very useful book to understand the foreign policy of the sole super power of the world as it faces a crisis. The year 2004 is an election year in the United States. As such, during 2004, Woodward will be referred to and quoted by Washington politicians either to support the President or to hammer him. *Bush at War* was published at an important point of history: the unleashing of the superpower's military might to defeat a group of non-state actors threatening the security of the one and perhaps the lonely super power of the world. If history uses *Bush at War* to judge US foreign policy actions in the post-September 11 era, Woodward would have served an important purpose.

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### Notes

1. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002. 376 pages + xiii. Price US\$ 28.
2. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).
3. *Foreign Policy* (March/April, 2003): 16.
4. See Ahmed Rashid, 'Bushed About the Facts', *Far Eastern Economic Review* (20 February): 58-59.

5. Richard Brookhiser, 'The Mind of George W. Bush', *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 2003): 56.
6. Ibid., 55-69.
7. Ibid., 62.
8. James Chace, 'Present at the Destruction: The Death of American Internationalism', *World Policy Journal* (Spring, 2003): 1.
9. Ibid.
10. Condoleezza Rice, 'Promoting the National Interest', *Foreign Affairs*, 79 no. 1 (January/February 2000): 45-62.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.