

Doling out dollars

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

Bush at War. By Bob Woodward. Simon & Shuster, 378 pp., \$28.00.

In late September 2001, just two weeks after the destruction of the World Trade Center, a covert paramilitary team crossed a high mountain pass into northeast Afghanistan to launch the first phase of what President George Bush has called a "war for civilization," a "war without end" and (in a June 2002 speech) a "titanic struggle against terror." On the floor of their Russian-made CIA helicopter was a large metal suitcase containing \$3 million in nonsequential \$100 bills. The team's leader told Bob Woodward that he laughs whenever he sees undercover agents on television who are supposedly carrying \$1 million in a slim attaché case--he knows from experience that it won't fit.

Doling out a million here and a million there is routine work for a CIA operative, "Gary" told Woodward. (CIA operatives are identified in the book only by their first names; even their relatives back home probably think they are organizing Junior Achievement clubs in New Delhi.) What was unusual this time was not the amount of money he had been given but the freedom he had to dole it out as he wished to local warlords of the Northern Alliance.

Most were already on the American payroll, but without their knowledge they had just received a handsome raise. Here is Woodward's reconstruction of the team's meeting with the head of intelligence and security for the Alliance:

Gary nodded and placed a bundle of cash on the table, \$500,000 in ten one-foot stacks of \$100 bills. He believed it would be more impressive than the usual \$200,000, the best way to say, "We're here, we're serious, here's money, we know you need it."

"What we want you to do is use it," he said. "Buy food, weapons, whatever you need to build your forces up." It was also for intelligence operations and to pay sources and agents. There was more money available--much more. Gary would soon ask CIA headquarters for and receive \$10 million in cash.

In his remarkable and often gripping account of the Bush administration's decision to attack the Taliban, investigative journalist Woodward brings us within earshot of key players as they debate alternative options, in or out of the public eye. There is a good deal of journalistic license involved in putting quotation marks around dialogue reconstructed long after the fact, and Woodward's penchant for reporting not just words but thoughts is occasionally annoying. Yet the range of sources that Woodward was able to draw on is truly astonishing.

All told, more than 100 informants contributed pieces of the story. Woodward was permitted not only to read but to quote from the transcripts of secret National Security Council meetings and to conduct interviews on the record with agency staff members and with military and paramilitary commanders. The president sat with him for nearly four hours in two interviews. More time, and a historian's scruples, will eventually provide a more nuanced account of the events that led to the ouster of the Taliban, but in the meantime this hastily assembled compilation of firsthand accounts pulls aside the curtain and reveals many aspects of this new kind of war.

That the initial weapons of the war in Afghanistan were suitcases full of currency is not its only unusual feature. President Bush himself asked his advisers, "Can we have the first bombs we drop be food?" Blankets, food and clothing were distributed along with cash and weapons to Northern Alliance allies. Bush told Woodward, "I was sensitive to this [accusation] that this was a religious war, and that somehow the United States would be the conqueror. And I wanted us to be viewed as the liberator." He added, "There is a human condition that we must worry about in times of war. There is a value system that cannot be compromised--God-given values. These aren't United States-created values. There are values of freedom and the human condition and mothers loving their children. . . . It leads to a larger question of your view about God. We're all God's children."

The war in Afghanistan was waged almost entirely from cockpits and bomb ports high above, after early strikes knocked out a few dozen defensive sites and gave American pilots unchallenged control of the air. Only 110 CIA officers and 316 Special Forces personnel were on the ground, Woodward reveals. He provides no statistics on Americans killed in action, but news sources suggest that the numbers did not reach two figures. Casualties on the other side, and among Afghan civilians, were hundreds of times higher, but estimates differ wildly among various sources.

Woodward does provide one hard number that is worth pondering. Cash outlays to reward friendly warlords and buy off Taliban sympathizers totaled \$70 million, which the president considered "one of the biggest bargains of all time." That amounts to something like \$2,000 per Northern Alliance soldier, less than a month's wages for the average American worker but equivalent to 20 times the average cash income in Afghanistan, according to United Nations figures.

In the president's desk in the Oval Office, we learn, is a scorecard with photographs of the 22 identified leaders of the al-Qaeda network. Months after the Taliban had been driven from power and the American air war had wound to a close, six of them had been killed or captured and the other 16 remained at large. Many of these men had been tracked by undercover agents for years before the September 11 attacks, Woodward reveals. Indeed, Bush had been told in a secret CIA briefing a week before his inauguration that Osama bin Laden and his followers were "a tremendous threat" and posed an "immediate" danger to the U.S. President Clinton had authorized covert actions against al-Qaeda on five different occasions, but none of the attempts had achieved much success. Nor, in the end, did the Afghan war.

Afghanistan is now carved up into virtually autonomous private enclaves, and neither the nominal national government nor its armed forces dares to challenge the personal armies to whom northern warlords have doled out those \$100 bills. As for the southern tribes, a CIA specialist told Colin Powell, "Some of them are into vision and some of them are into money, and we need to administer to both."

The al-Qaeda forces who were the official target of the war escaped into hiding in the mountains near or over the Pakistani border, where they still remain. Did the U.S. do enough to root out the sources of terrorism? When Woodward puts this question to the president, Bush is evasive. "The answer is, if they hit us hard, the answer is no. If they don't hit us hard, the answer is, we did it right."

Among the most surprising and disheartening revelations of Bush at War is the virtual absence, in all the hours of interviews and reams of transcripts, of any serious discussion of such questions as whether the war was justified under accepted moral criteria and whether it would lead to a better postwar situation in Afghanistan. The president's musings about honoring "God-given values," which motivated him to link humanitarian aid to air strikes, constitute almost the only mention of either religious or moral values by any of Woodward's sources. There are no entries in the index for "morality" or "religion" (but several dozen under "media").

Perhaps this reflects a belief that moral rules are dispensable in a battle of good against evil.

Woodward's microscopic view confirms what more distant observers have said about the Bush White House: unquestioning loyalty is expected of everyone. But this does not prevent heated debate over policy options among advisers. In the days leading up to Bush's address to the United Nations in August 2002, Woodward reveals, Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were engaged in a pitched battle with Secretary of State Colin Powell over key elements of the speech. Cheney "was beyond hell-bent for action against Saddam," writes Woodward, and Rumsfeld agreed with him that the U.S. should move quickly and not wait for UN approval. But Powell succeeded in persuading the president to wait, and he was permitted to add a sentence to the final draft pledging American cooperation with the passage of appropriate UN resolutions.

For all that it adds to our understanding of the Afghan war, Woodward's account leaves us with few clues to the administration's current resolve to replicate that war a thousand kilometers away in Iraq--in the opposite direction of al-Qaeda's escape route. President Bush is not afraid of acting unilaterally, it is clear. "We're never going to get people all in agreement about force and use of force," he tells Woodward. He says the U.S. may need to take "confident action that will yield positive results [and thus] provide a kind of slipstream into which reluctant nations and leaders can get behind."

If we can untangle this jumble of metaphors it seems to amount to the prediction--utterly unrelated to any serious application of just war criteria--that those who dispute the legitimacy of an attack on Iraq today will be first in line to congratulate the U.S. on its success afterward.

Yet there seems to be no more consideration of how to stabilize postwar Iraq than there was in the case of Afghanistan. First we are told of an emerging coalition of Iraqi opposition groups, but if and when this coalition breaks up in squabbles, we are assured that a multilateral force will take control, and if and when its potential participants repudiate this idea, we hear talk that an American government of occupation may be necessary. The president would do well to heed the advice of his father, who wrote in a 1998 book coauthored with Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, of his decision not to carry the war in Kuwait all the way to Baghdad:

Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have . . . incurred incalculable human and political costs. Apprehending him was probably impossible. We had been unable to find Noriega in Panama, which we knew intimately. We would have been forced to occupy Baghdad and, in effect, rule Iraq. The coalition would instantly have collapsed, the Arabs deserting it in anger and other allies pulling out as well. Under those circumstances, there was no viable "exit strategy" we could see, violating another of our principles.

Furthermore, we had been self-consciously trying to set a pattern for handling aggression in the post-cold-war world. Going in and occupying Iraq, thus unilaterally exceeding the United Nations' mandate, would have destroyed the precedent of international response to aggression that we hoped to establish. Had we gone the invasion route, the U.S. could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land. It would have been a dramatically different and perhaps barren outcome.