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Volume 4

Number 2 *Volume 4, No. 2, Summer  
2011: Strategic Security in the Cyber  
Age*

Article 10

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# "Obama's Wars," Bob Woodward, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010)

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## Recommended Citation

Kilroy, Richard J. Jr.. "'Obama's Wars,' Bob Woodward, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010)." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 2 (2011) : 121-123.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.2.9>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol4/iss2/10>

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***Obama's Wars.* By Bob Woodward. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010. ISBN 9-781439-172490. Photographs. Author's Interview Notes. 441 pages. \$30.00.**

Since his first book (*All the President's Men* with Carl Bernstein), published almost forty years ago, Bob Woodward continues to be the epic storyteller of American political journalists. His unparalleled access to sources within Presidential administrations who want to bare all (e.g., "deep throat") have provided readers unique insights into the decision-making practices of politicians from Nixon to Obama.

In these later years, Woodward continues his "war series" of texts begun under President George W. Bush (*Bush at War*, etc.), with a look into the current Obama Administration's first eighteen months in office. While Bush faced the decision of committing the United States to a Global War on Terror, one of Obama's first national security challenges was deciding how to continue it in one theater of operations: Afghanistan. Obama believed he came into office with an electoral mandate to end the war in Iraq; however, he also promised to focus on the "real war" on terror, primarily in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border area. In the debates leading up to his November 2008 election, Obama emphasized a need to shift the main effort in the war on terror from Iraq back to Afghanistan, which he felt had been under-resourced and marginalized in the five years since the invasion of Iraq.

Woodward focuses on Obama's new national security team and the differing views they provided him on what course to follow in Afghanistan. Civilian leaders, such as Vice President Joe Biden and Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, cautioned against a major build-up of forces in Afghanistan, fearing that it would quickly become Obama's war to lose, like Vietnam. Military leaders, such as Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, argued that a "surge" of forces was necessary to address the deteriorating security situation in the country and the reemergence of the Taliban. The crux of Woodward's investigative reporting in the book is the context of civil-military relations within the Obama Administration and the impact of these tensions on national security decision-making.

When Obama came into office, he directed Bush-holdover Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to provide him options on Afghanistan. Gates and his military leaders only came up with one option: more troops. The only question was how many. This was unacceptable to Obama, who wanted his military leaders to offer a new strategic vision on the war, one that did not view Afghanistan as an open-ended commitment with no exit strategy. Military commanders saw Obama in the same light as his democratic predecessor in the White House, Bill Clinton, a lightweight on foreign policy with no real understanding of war-fighting. They expected him to trust their judgment, as Bush had done, in prosecuting the war effort.

Woodward does a credible job of presenting the diversity of views among the most senior military and civilian leaders on the options presented to Obama. Woodward exposes not only a significant rift between the military and the administration, but also an internal conflict within the military over its role within a democratic society and what it means to be subordinate to civilian authority. The tragic figure in Woodward's account is retired Marine General Jim Jones, who served as Obama's National Security Advisor. As a former Marine Corps Commandant and Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, Jones expected to play a more significant role in shaping the new administration's national security strategy, particularly defense policy issues. However, Jones was marginalized from the start, never accepted as an administration insider, nor trusted by his former Department of Defense colleagues. Jones ended up resigning his position in frustration, signaling a further rift in civil-military relations in general, and confusion in national security strategy in particular.

Obama was criticized by Republicans for taking too long to decide on a strategy in Afghanistan and allowing the security environment to further deteriorate. Military leaders openly criticized the President's indecisiveness and even mocked the administration's civilian leaders, leading to the eventual replacement of General McChrystal as Commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The entire episode communicated an administration out of touch with its military, and a military not completely in subordination to its elected leaders.

When reading a Woodward text, it is easy to dismiss his journalism as grandstanding, focused on his own sense of importance, given his insider access to successive administrations. He does not cite sources and provides little documentation of his original material. Readers are expected to "trust Bob" and accept his accounts as accurate portrayals of what really goes on behind the closed doors of the White House. Yet, in his

defense, rarely do you see anyone rebutting his arguments. Most of the sources in his texts appear to be content with giving him access and providing their point of view to "set the record straight."

In a recent discussion after his book was released, Bob Woodward admitted that his goal in publishing these insider accounts of presidential administrations was to foster democracy by promoting full disclosure and an open debate on national security issues. Based on his experiences exposing the Nixon White House cover-ups, he still feels the greatest threat to the nation is secrecy and a government that is not accountable to those it serves. In *Obama's Wars*, Woodward continues this theme by dedicating his book "to those who serve" in the armed forces. He believes they deserve leaders, both in uniform and out, who understand their sacrifices based on the decisions these leaders make to commit our nation's blood and treasure to war. Woodward expects such decisions should not be taken lightly.

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