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POLS 250

Professor Schiavoni

Book Review #1

Crile, George. Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times. New York: Grove Press, 2003.

A New York Times best-seller, released during a period of turbulence and confusion in 2003, *Charlie Wilson's War* brings readers into a similar period within the Cold War. The author, George Crile III, was an award-winning journalist for CBS News. In 1988, George first conceptualized this story while working on his 60 Minutes profile of the Texas congressman, Charlie Wilson, to capture the thrilling and convoluted time in our government's history. From then on, George painted a picture of those times of tension through many historical perspectives. This brief analysis will shed light on the book's historical analysis, the author's approach, and their storytelling technique, concluding with a personal evaluation.

George was no academic historian, but over his career as a journalist, his work revolved around the CIA, foreign affairs, and Cold War events. As an article from CBS described, "Foreign intrigue was a constant theme in Crile's work." His extensive field experience and research most certainly show within his writing. However, the historical timeline is occasionally overshadowed by the author's enthusiasm and fascination with this period, along with his profound glorification of the main character, Charlie. Throughout this narrative, the purpose was clear. To recount this unknown critical event in our history through the lens of the congressman who made it all happen. The story depicted Charlie as the most exciting man in the world. Even his unethical and unprofessional behavior was written as a challenge for Charlie to overcome. In the Cocaine Charlie chapter, George continually describes Charlie as the victim, using language like 'target' and 'hunted.' This begs the question, is it ethical to glance over the reality of our

history to glorify the main character in a divine light? It is crucial to navigate the delicate balance between historical accuracy and narrative portrayal with the author's gathering of evidence.

George was a highly experienced and respected Journalist. He was a professional in getting the facts and putting them together in a nice, digestible, and intriguing piece. However, getting facts straight from Charlie does come with some inherited biases. Peter Henning, a fellow producer, told George, "You could turn Charlie Wilson into the biggest hero you've ever heard of... or a complete clown. It just depends which way you want to cut it." Nevertheless, it is important to mention that this story would likely have never surfaced without George's persistent reporting efforts. He brought to light many crucial contextual events of the Afghan conflict. He was the one that made smaller yet impactful events like Charlie's visit to the refugee camp seem so significant. It is also worth mentioning that the brief notes at the bottom of certain pages provide additional context, making it convenient for readers to explore topics in more depth if they are interested. Pictures of Charlie on the white horse and others like it were also an impactful addition throughout the book. While gathering and organizing facts is important, the writing and the story ultimately sustain the reader's engagement until the end.

The writing in this book is often the subject of controversy, and at times, the book is well deserving of scrutiny, but at other times, it prevails. When it comes to historical nonfiction, the story opens in an excellent way. He goes straight to the story's conclusion, telling readers that Charlie did it. Although at the tail end of the story, it would have been nice had it come full circle back to the award ceremony, it still manages to return to a similar celebratory atmosphere. This made a finely written conclusion to the story just before the epilogue. Other than that, there were times in the book when the story would unnecessarily jump back and forth in the timeline. For example, the chapter 'The Price of Glory' opens with an important event for Pakistan depicting

dozens of random explosions in the Pakistani capital; however, it cuts off abruptly on page 486 and moves on to another topic. It then picks up with a vague explanation of that event on page 491, when it could have easily been explained right after. Brief shifts like these did very little to add depth to the current plot development other than confuse the reader.

As mentioned, this story was told from a professional journalistic point of view. It was apparent there were some biases and embellished storytelling to contribute to the grand Hero Charlie narrative. It was not the most favorable from a purely historical standpoint; nevertheless, this was a core part of the storytelling, making it enjoyable and captivating to read. From a narrative standpoint, the alternation between the perspectives of Good Time Charlie and the rogue agent Gust was genuinely engaging and enjoyable. However, having a more linear timeline and contextual evidence for events would have been optimal. Such as the 'Halloween Massacre' that was brought up as a massive event for Gust's early career. A short description of how that event occurred would have added much-needed context for a less informed reader.

The story of Charlie Wilson's War provides a unique perspective on a critical and often overlooked period in U.S. history. While the storytelling approach may lean towards a heroic portrayal, George Crile's journalistic background and investigative efforts make this what it is today. Despite some narrative jumps and potential biases, the book's contribution to historical understanding is undeniable. Though not perfect, the writing still manages to captivate readers and sustain their engagement through to the end. This book offers much insight and knowledge into some complicated inner workings of governments and foreign policy. Ultimately, the storytelling and exploration of the Afghan war make this book compelling and thought-provoking.

