



# Book Obama's Wars

Bob Woodward  
Simon & Schuster, 2010

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## Recommendation

Hours after his election as the 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama learned details of the top-secret circumstances that defined the Afghanistan conflict, a war characterized by inadequate resources, incomplete planning, inchoate strategy and ongoing bloodshed. Bob Woodward of *The Washington Post* applied his legendary reporting skills to reams of meeting notes, classified reports and interviews to recreate the often tempestuous policy making on Afghanistan that marked Obama's first 18 months in office. Woodward's trip to Afghanistan and his unfettered access to top officials in more than 100 interviews, including more than an hour with the president, put you at the center of marathon meetings, disputes and discussions peopled by contrasting personalities and their shifting allegiances. *BooksInShort* recommends this masterful work of reporting, an engrossing book on how the US is managing a war "with no good options."

## Take-Aways

- Barack Obama inherited severe challenges upon his election as US president.
- The most intractable was the Afghanistan war, which had been waged for years with insufficient resources.
- Pakistan, with its porous borders and irresolute leaders, is essential to resolving the war.
- George W. Bush's administration did not formulate viable contingency plans for hotspots such as Yemen, Somalia and Iran.
- Increasing tension with the Afghan government, led by a politically and mentally unstable president, Hamid Karzai, is an additional obstacle to US disengagement.
- The US military fashioned its Afghanistan proposal on counterinsurgency tactics, calling for up to 85,000 more troops.
- Vice President Joseph Biden advocated "counterterrorism lite" with fewer soldiers.
- Rifts developed between and among the White House and Pentagon teams.
- Obama called for options and "an exit strategy."
- His final decision added 30,000 more troops to "degrade" the Taliban and train Afghan security forces.

## Summary

### Mr. President-elect...

Two days after winning the November 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama met with Mike McConnell, his predecessor's director of national intelligence (DNI), for a briefing on the "highly classified intelligence operations and capabilities of the vast US espionage establishment." In a closed, secure room, Obama learned more about the challenges he was inheriting as president.

"The tough-talking, saber-rattling Bush administration had not prepared for some of the worst-case scenarios the country might face."

With 161,000 US troops deployed in Iraq and another 38,000 in Afghanistan, Obama learned that a larger threat to his military now came from nuclear-equipped Pakistan, whose 1,500-mile, porous border with Afghanistan provided easy, safe passage to al Qaeda, the Taliban and their affiliates. Tribal chiefs working with the Taliban ruled Pakistan's "Federally Administered Tribal Areas." In 2006 the Pakistani government gave up authority over the North Waziristan border region, which quickly became "kind of a Wild West" for extremists and a staging ground for moving people and arms in the war against US forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan's military espionage unit, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), played both sides, ostensibly supporting US interests while arming and funding the Taliban. Why? Pakistan needed to ensure that, whatever happened in Afghanistan, its greatest enemy – India – would not gain a foothold in the country.

“In his [inaugural] address, Obama devoted one sentence to the wars: ‘We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan’.”

Angered by the ISI’s duplicity, George W. Bush’s administration authorized Predator drone attacks in Pakistan, alerting the Pakistanis only during or after the sorties. But drones need sources on the ground to identify targets, so the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had gone to great lengths to groom and protect these spies, keeping their identities secret from everyone except the president and “designated cabinet officials.” Augmenting this intelligence capability were the top-secret Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams, “the CIA’s 3,000-man covert army,” which worked to win tribal support and to fight against the Taliban. In September 2008, these troops conducted a botched raid into Pakistan to seize a house al Qaeda was using. The raid ended with civilian casualties, and the Pakistani government excoriated the US for breaching its border.

## **But There’s More...**

Bush’s DNI continued briefing Obama: Yemen housed the group “al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.” Iran would probably develop and set off a “gun-type nuclear weapon” by 2015. And “loony” North Korea already possessed the “nuclear material for six bombs.” The threat of cyber terrorism also loomed. During the summer of 2008, the Chinese had hacked into both the Democratic and Republican presidential campaign computers, so Obama knew the danger’s broad outlines. He now learned about offensive US strategies, including Computer Network Attack (CNA), “the most sophisticated stealthy computer hacking,” which can enter foreign computer systems, and the Computer Network Defense (CND), which seeks to protect the US’s banking, electrical, air traffic control and telecommunications systems from enemy infiltration.

“A six-to-eight year war at \$50 billion a year is not in the national interest of the United States.”

Calling the information “sobering, but not surprising,” Obama realized, “I’m inheriting a world that could blow up any minute in half a dozen ways.” While he wanted to focus on the “under-resourced...poor man’s war” in Afghanistan, Obama quickly learned that America was ill equipped to respond to the world’s other hotspots. No up-to-date plans existed for dealing with Iran, Yemen or Somalia – another al Qaeda redoubt. The US had not prepared adequate responses for frightening but plausible scenarios, like Pakistan becoming a radical Islamic state with nuclear weapons. The US remained unsure of the nukes’ locations. The Obama team needed to spend time and resources analyzing and planning solid contingency plans.

“McChrystal had organized a jaw-dropping counterterrorism campaign inside Iraq, but the tactical successes did not translate into a strategic victory.”

The terrorist attacks on Mumbai beginning on November 26 crystallized the US’s greatest fears and presented the incumbent Bush administration with a potentially deadly conundrum. Intelligence showed that the ISI had trained the Mumbai terrorists, and nuke-equipped India was threatening retaliation. The Bush Doctrine called for military strikes against terrorists and their enablers, regardless of their locations. Lkening the Mumbai strikes to the September 11, 2001 attacks, but seeking to avert nuclear war, Bush himself assured India’s prime minister that the Pakistanis were not culpable. Neither India nor the US responded militarily.

## **Off to a Bad Start**

Just before Obama’s inauguration in January 2009, Vice President-elect Joe Biden and Senator Lindsey Graham took a bipartisan trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan. They told Pakistan’s president that his nation should root out terrorist support within the ISI. Then they had a troubling dinner with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his ministers. Karzai, a manic-depressive, presided over an openly corrupt government. He often relied on information from Taliban propaganda to criticize the US for civilian casualties. His brother, a paid CIA informant even before 9/11, received rent from the US military for sites “he arguably did not own or control” and allegedly “profited from the opium trade.” Biden and Graham delivered Obama’s message that things had to change. For instance, Karzai could no longer subvert the authority of on-the-ground US officials by citing a “special relationship” with the US president, as he had done with Bush. After sustained criticism, Karzai said, “‘We’re just poor Afghans...no one cares about–’ Biden threw down his napkin. ‘This is beneath you, Mr. President’.” The dinner soon ended.

## **“In the Context of a Broader Strategy”**

President Obama held his first National Security Council session on Afghanistan three days after his inauguration. Though he had campaigned on sending in more troops, he wanted a “coherent” plan on executing and ending the war before he ordered the buildup. The military, which had seen its requests for more troops languish on bureaucrats’ desks during the Bush administration, pressed for an immediate increase of 30,000 soldiers, later revised to 17,000. Obama agreed to authorize 17,000 interim additions to provide security during the upcoming Afghan elections. Yet the US commanders sent 8,000 of these troops into sparsely inhabited areas with few voters.

“This was why counterinsurgency – blanketing the population in safety and winning them over – was necessary.”

Various groups within the White House and the Pentagon researched and revised war plans for the president’s review. All agreed that Pakistan, which harbored Taliban and al Qaeda fighters, held the key to success in Afghanistan and must be the center of US efforts. Yet Pakistan continued to obfuscate, declaring its support of US airstrikes within its borders, but tolerating and supporting extremists. The US military insisted on more troops: from 30,000 to a full 85,000 additional troops, including trainers for the Afghan security forces. They wanted years to accomplish the mission of bolstering Afghan security sufficiently to replace US troops.

“‘We have no good options here,’ the president said, making it clear he would not automatically accept the general’s [McChrystal’s], or anyone’s, solution.”

The military counted on a counterinsurgency plan, or COIN, to embed troops in villages to protect and win over the Afghan people. As had happened during the surge in Iraq, military commanders – including General Stanley A. McChrystal, Commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and General David A. Petraeus, Commander of the US Central Command – believed tribal heads would forsake the Taliban in favor of security provided by a strong central Afghan government and military. But it might take a generation to fashion an Afghan government stable enough to protect its own people. A group led by Biden argued for “counterterrorism lite,” a plan to continue flushing out Taliban fighters while fostering the development of Afghan security forces. The Biden plan would require fewer soldiers, some

20,000, and would get the US out of “nation-building.” Obama’s team understood that continued investment in Afghanistan meant abandoning critical domestic needs amid an economic crisis and high unemployment.

## “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot”

The president’s national security adviser, General James L. Jones, a former Marine commander, met with US commanders in Afghanistan in June 2009 to explain the administration’s desired outcomes: “1) Security, 2) Economic development and reconstruction, and 3) Governance by the Afghans under the rule of law.” While the military leaders preferred a counterinsurgency strategy, they had little appetite for building Afghanistan’s economy and government. Jones had to counter the military brass’s repeated demands for more troops, even after 21,000 more soldiers had been sent to the field. He’d ask the “expressionless” colonels, “How do you think President Obama might look at this?” Having already granted so many troops, the president would be apt to have “a Whiskey Tango Foxtrot” (“W.T.F.”) reaction, “the universal outburst of astonishment and anger” from the normally unflappable Obama.

“Biden told the Pakistani president about Obama’s thinking, ‘Afghanistan is going to be his war’.”

A rift was growing between the White House and the Pentagon: The military seemed to be “trying to box in the president” by leaking stories to newspapers on the need for more troops in order to “win” the war. Even within the White House, an us-versus-them attitude led to distrust between the Obama political staff – including Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel – and Jones’s national security team. As insider policy groups hurried to finalize proposals for the president’s review, disputes broke out over semantics: the need to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat” the Taliban meant different levels of commitment and troop strength. Disrupting and dismantling the Taliban would keep it from ever overtaking the Afghan state again; defeating the Taliban would entail annihilating it with an extended war effort and many more troops.

“Right in front of the commander in chief, two four-star officers had openly exhibited their internal tension.”

The August 2009 Afghan elections, reputedly fixed, left the reelected Karzai increasingly unstable, by his own staff’s accounts. The Afghan police force, seen by the US military as critical to enforcing national security, was 80% illiterate, riddled with drug abuse and depleted by 25% annual attrition. Years of US investment and training had made little impact and created little hope for change. When Gen. McChrystal wrote the account of his first 60 days in Afghanistan, he predicted dire outcomes unless the US deployed more troops, but his reaction helped solidify the US’s “core objectives.” Penetrating terrorist strongholds in Pakistan became increasingly crucial in terms of saving Afghanistan and ensuring US security. Without that, more US military support and aid could not change Afghanistan’s entrenched governance and economic problems.

“[Secretary of State] Clinton said, ‘The only way to get governance changes is to add troops, but there’s still no guarantee that it will work’.”

However, leaving Afghanistan with insufficient numbers of US troops would endanger the entire region, and the only way to strengthen Pakistan would be to work with India to improve Indian-Pakistani relations. Thus, the policy-making emphasis now shifted to finding ways to “degrade” the Taliban in hopes of its eventual reintegration into Afghan society. A rehabilitated Taliban would be less of a draw for al Qaeda to return to Afghanistan, particularly in the face of a massive US and NATO deployment. America’s national security also required fighting al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia, but the needed US military resources were diverted to Afghanistan.

## Dover Air Force Base

President Obama, whose nature is to mull over all options, began to chafe at the prolonged, often conflicting, discussions. He wanted options and “an exit strategy.” His team began to fear that the process “was veering out of control in a way that would make it difficult ever to get consensus.”

“Drone strikes are similar to going after a beehive one bee at a time. They would not destroy the hive.”

On Thursday, October 29, just after midnight, Obama took a helicopter to Dover Air Force Base, where the remains of fallen American soldiers return to the US before interment. After comforting the soldiers’ families, he stood in the cold for two hours to salute 18 flag-covered caskets as a precisely trained squad unloaded them. He flew back to Washington in silence.

“The president was in a desperate search for another option.”

The president met the next day with the joint chiefs, commanders of the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force. A month later, on November 29, Obama himself wrote his “final orders for Afghanistan Pakistan strategy.” The military would focus on six goals: turning around the Taliban’s thrust, keeping them out of – and out of control of – pivotal cities, “disrupting” Taliban operations while blocking al Qaeda from finding safe haven within Afghanistan, “degrading” the Taliban so much that Afghani security forces can manage them, and increasing the Afghan administration’s ability to govern, with special attention to “the ministries of defense and interior.”

“If President Bush told Petraeus yes, Obama was prepared to say no.”

The orders authorized an additional 30,000 US troops and provided for a strategic review in December 2010, with the goal of “transferring lead security responsibility” to the Afghans in order to “begin reducing US forces” by July 2011.

## About the Author

**Bob Woodward**, associate editor at *The Washington Post*, is a co-winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, including one for his reporting of the Watergate scandal.

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