

Liberal Victors of the War in Afghanistan
A Review Essay of Charlie Wilson's War

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Journalist George Crile's *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York: Grove Press, 2003) is better than the movie based on it but both leave much to be desired as far as the history of the American assistance for the Afghani *mujahedeen* is concerned.

According to the Hollywood myth, liberal Congressman Charles Wilson (D-Texas) singlehandedly dragooned his fellow legislators into supporting covert war in Afghanistan, and his CIA friend Gust Avrakotos with a handful of underlings won the Afghani war despite the leadership of the CIA and the rest of the American conservative establishment. We can dismiss this as a fairy tale. However, the movie and the book have a few lessons to offer.

In general, it is obvious that the United States of America sorely lacks continuity in its foreign policy. Following the expulsion of the Soviets, Washington simply abandoned Afghanistan. The Taliban and al Qaeda nefariously took advantage of this and other factors. The US has always concentrated on immediate problems but has failed to anticipate and neutralize future threats (a similar pattern, albeit on a much larger scale, was at play during the Second World War when the Roosevelt administration blindly trusted "Uncle Joe" Stalin). Thus, when an exigency occurs (as, say, the war in Iraq), America concentrates and deploys much of its resources to meet it. When the threat apparently passes, we forget about it immediately (e.g., Vietnam).

The second important message of *Charlie Wilson's War* concerns one role of women in politics. I don't mean the dancers, models, and escorts that the Congressman customarily liked to surround himself with. Instead, let us appreciate the socialities, American ladies of substantial standing. Individuals like the heiress Joanne Herring are indispensable allies in every political undertaking. They have the time, the vision, the passion, and the means to organize extragovernmental activities. They throw parties, invite top players, and discreetly achieve results. Their charm and perseverance allows these American women to reach the mighty, the movers and shakers. It is the ladies who finance non-governmental propaganda offensives and, sometimes, even informal political-military actions. They are behind public diplomacy and private covert activities. They influence their wealthy friends, who generously support all sorts of adventures. This does not apply to Afghanistan only. For example, hardly anything happens in Polish affairs in the United States without some form of participation of Lady Blanka Rosenstiel.

The third lesson concerns the informal aspects of our democratic system. Back door deals and favor swaps are the norm in Congress, where flexible politicians agree to agree in corridors, lobbies, and clubs. And more often than not the system is bi-partisan. Obscure items mysteriously appear on the agenda, get attached to pork-and-barrel projects, and they are voted in. Where there is a will, there is a way. One should stress here, once again, the role of assistants and interns who oftentimes are left in charge of initiating and working out the details of such deals. A few months ago I was congratulated on a piece of legislation. When I expressed my dismayed ignorance on the topic, I was reminded that one of my students headed the congressional office of one of the sponsors of the bill. She knows everyone and the Congressman would not be able to function without her. Once again, here is a tribute to powerful women.

Lesson number four is the polycentrism of the American power system. There is no centralization. There is no single center of power. In America one must approach a score of institutions, groups, or communities to be successful in lobbying. Naturally, one must know which ones to target. Charlie Wilson knew very well. Thus the success of his alliance with Gust Avrakotos based upon "chasing [expletive deleted] and killing commies."

Former Mayor of New York City Ed Koch wrote in his e-mail commentary how "we were on a junket in Israel. [Charlie] became involved with an officer of the Israeli navy. The military authorities disapproved and recalled her. Charlie was furious. I went to the government representative and said: 'here you have the most important non-Jewish friend of Israel in Congress. If you infuriate him,

everything can change. I appeal to you to return the officer to her post.' And that's what happened." This is lesson number five. One can influence important congressmen through sex, although one cannot guarantee that it will always be limited to consenting adults.

Lesson number six, which is missing from the movie but emerges from Crile's book, is the significant role played in the Department of Defense and secret services of the United States of the so-called "ethnics," Americans of Central and Eastern European descent. For example, the Polish-American Ed Juchniewicz was one of the top CIA guns in Asia, and the Polish-American Brigadier General Walter Jajko USAF was the Defense Intelligence Agency's officer responsible for arming the mujahedeen. It is their alliance with the remnant of the traditional WASP elite that kept America strong and staunchly anti-Communist during the Cold War. One imagines that the alliance endures and has coopted Americans of other origins in the current struggle against radical Islamists.

These are the main lessons of *Charlie Wilson's War*. Of course Hollywood would not have been itself, had it not inserted leftist, not-so-subliminal messages into the story. The movie is hostile toward religion. Already at the outset the director wasted quite a bit of time to mock Protestant evangelicals who set up a Christmas manger in front of a firehouse of a small Texas town. The saintly American Civil Liberties Union immediately attacked this "outrage." Generally, the creators of the movie not only assault Islam but also Christianity. The latter gets skewered in the person of Joanne Herring who expressed her anti-Communism in the form of a Christian crusade. The movie draws relativistic parallels between Christian anti-Communism and radical Islam. The viewer is invited to believe that both are somehow "bad" and "identical" for they come from similar, allegedly, irrational roots – Faith. There is a substantial difference, however, between self-defense and jihad. On the one hand, one should have no problem commending Christian and any other self-defense from totalitarian Communism, which wanted to take over the world and create a "worker's paradise" of terror. On the other hand, one should plainly condemn jihad, which endeavors to conquer the Earth so we would all live happily ever after in the Dar-al-Islam (Abode of Islam). All that is lost on the moral relativists of Hollywood.

Further, big surprise, the movie makers are prejudiced against Republicans. They favor Democrats. The latter allegedly won the war in Afghanistan. And how should we interpret the fact that the former Republican presidential hopeful Rudi Gulliani is mentioned several times in the film and always in a pejorative context? On the other hand, the script writer heaped effusive hosannas on leftist Congressman John Murtha, cleansing him of all allegations of corruption. (A full disclosure: a friend of mine, Lt. Col. William Trower Russell, Jr., is running against Murtha in Pennsylvania; another disclosure: the script writer of *Charlie Wilson's War* is Aaron Sorkin, the very same who penned the ultra-liberal tale of the White House in NBC's "The West Wing").

Hollywood obliterates some historical figures from our collective memory through silence. Not a word on CIA Director Bill Casey. Almost nothing on Ronald Reagan. The head of the Soviet desk on the National Security Council, John Lenczowski, is a non-person. The makers of the movie are very ashamed of words like "Communism" and "Soviets." They mostly have their characters talk about "killing the Russians." However, almost everyone who opposed the Evil Empire did so for ideological reasons. They were propelled by anti-Communism and not some ethno-nationalist hatred of the Russians.

Charlie Wilson's War demonstrates how the Left can score for itself an important victory in culture wars. This is how the legend of liberal anti-Communism is made, despite the fact that most liberals were either absent from (or, a few, even rooted for the enemy during) the Cold War. This is the fault of the conservatives who, because of laziness or false modesty, have been all too often incapable of transmitting the truth of the great victory to the future generations. Thus, very soon, the people of the United States will believe that Communism was vanquished by Ted Kennedy and not Ronald Reagan.

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