

How Biden Got Suckered by Putin

REVIEW: 'War' by Bob Woodward

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By David J. Garrow

Many Americans of my generation—born early 1950s—have been living with Bob Woodward our entire adult lives. You think I'm speaking figuratively, but in my case it's literally true: Way downstairs in a "Nixon cupboard" are my original hardback copies of *All the President's Men* (1974) and *The Final Days* (1976); up on a third-floor Supreme Court shelf is *The Brethren* (1979); in a second floor study are *Veil* (1987), *The Choice* (1996), and *Shadow* (1999), plus *Fear* (2018) and *Rage* (2020); in an "FBI basement" bookcase is *The Secret Man* (2005); here in the office I work in are *Obama's Wars* (2010) and *The Price of Politics* (2012). There are another 10, on subjects ranging from John Belushi to Alan Greenspan, which I don't own.

Suffice it to say that Robert U. Woodward has been a ubiquitous presence in American life ever since the Watergate summer of 1972. That's quite a career. Indeed, Woodward may well be *the* most consequential journalist in American history, eclipsing long-ago names like Scotty Reston and Joe Alsop, whom almost no one nowadays will remember, or even his famous onetime boss, Ben Bradlee. Remember, in the 1976 movie based on his first book, Robert Redford played Woodward, Jason Robards played Bradlee.

Like all of Woodward's prior books, *War*, which focuses on President Joe Biden and his top national security advisers over the past several years, is based on his practice of "deep background" interviews, where his sources are not explicitly named. But in *War*, Woodward is far more transparent than in past books about whom he's relying upon, almost to the point where a reader looks to see if either Secretary of State Tony Blinken or National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan appear on the title page under a moniker of "with the assistance of."

Woodward accurately states that his intimate level of access allowed for "often a real-time, inside-the-room look at ... the president and his core

national security team," truly to the point where a good many recounted conversations read like virtual transcripts of what was said. Indeed, if American journalism still retained the professional seriousness of decades past, *War* would have stimulated far more "hard news" stories these past few weeks than it actually has.

Take Joe Biden's foul-mouthed disdain for Barack Obama's 2014 response when Russian dictator Vladimir Putin seized Crimea and the eastern Donbas from Ukraine. As Woodward explains, "Obama and their team had failed to spot Putin's brazen land grab for what it was and adequately push back on it." Biden put it more bluntly: "They fucked up ... Barack never took Putin seriously," and "We did nothing. We gave Putin a license to continue," as he did in February 2022.

Furthermore, Biden's own disastrous 2021 decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan contributed significantly to Putin's renewed military aggression six months later. In 2021 all of Biden's top military advisers opposed a total withdrawal, but Biden stubbornly discounted their advice, and the result was "devastating chaos" and the deaths of 13 U.S. service members at Kabul's airport. "They had failed to anticipate contingencies and plan for worst-case scenarios," Woodward observes. As former president George W. Bush predicted at the time, "I'm afraid Afghan women and girls are going to suffer unspeakable harm," as indeed they have, while Biden vapidly insisted the U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan was an "extraordinary success."

As Woodward explains, "the fiasco of the U.S. withdrawal was a centerpiece of Putin's disdain" for Biden's decision-making, and within several months U.S. intelligence agencies learned that Putin was planning an intensified assault against Ukraine. *War*'s references to this information, "including a human source inside the Kremlin," notwithstanding Blinken's assertion that just "three to four people" actually knew Putin's intent, leave a reader somewhat perplexed, as other passages—"information from inside the Kremlin" and "intelligence of conversations inside the Kremlin"—suggest "sigint"—signals intelligence—rather than "humint"—a human mole.

No matter whether this is "either/or," or imaginably "both/and," this level of disclosure, of course, threatens to "burn" whatever the source or method was. Then, almost a year later, in September 2022, as Ukraine valiantly continued to resist the Russian invasion and successfully liberated large swaths of territory both southeast of Kharkiv and near Kherson in the south, the United States obtained "new highly sensitive, credible conversations inside the Kremlin showing" that Putin was "seriously considering" the use of a tactical nuclear weapon to avoid losing Kherson city. U.S. intelligence, Woodward writes, reported there was "a 50 percent chance Putin would order the use of tactical nuclear weapons," plural.

On October 21, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin informed his Russian counterpart, Sergei Shoigu, that "we know you are contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons" and that doing so would have "existential implications for you." That might have *sounded* like a warning that the United States would terminate Putin's regime, but to his aides, the president actually was articulating a completely contrary message. "Biden had said privately that if Putin used a tactical nuclear weapon ... the U.S. would not respond with nuclear weapons," Woodward reports. "I'm not going to have a nuclear response," he quotes Biden, and in what should be seen as *the* most newsworthy statement in *War*, Biden told Jake Sullivan that "if we do succeed in ejecting Russia from Ukraine, we face a very strong likelihood of nuclear use. ... Too much success is nukes." As any reader pondering that quotation will quickly realize, that meant that Joe Biden did not—and thus *does not*—actually want Ukraine to *win* by retaking all of its sovereign territory from the Russian invaders. Why has the Biden administration's military support of Ukraine been *so* insistently grudging and drip-drip? There's the answer!

When the Iranian-funded terrorist group Hamas launched its tragically successful surprise attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Biden and his aides had an even more pressing crisis thrust upon them. Woodward's narration of events over the ensuing months is impressively sure-handed and bracing, perhaps especially his frank and refreshing acknowledgment that anyone imagining a "pathway to a Palestinian state" and thus a so-called two-state solution is engaging in "wishful thinking."

Indeed, *the* lifetime achievement and now legacy of former Hamas chief Yahya Sinwar, the mastermind of the October 7 slaughter, lies in guaranteeing that there will *never ever* be any Palestinian state. Woodward's instructive account details how insistently self-destructive Sinwar's control of Hamas proved for Gaza's Palestinian civilians. "On multiple occasions," as intermediaries worked to free the Israelis taken captive by the October 7 terrorists, "hostage exchange offers approved by the Hamas political leadership" outside Gaza would be dismissed once Sinwar weighed in: "We reject this offer." Woodward quotes CIA director Bill Burns, saying, "It's hard to negotiate with someone with a death wish," which fortunately has now been fulfilled. Woodward's overall verdict that Sinwar was "without a care in the world for what was happening to Gazans" and was "willing to sacrifice every last Palestinian" so as to kill additional Jews is a fitting analysis of the ongoing tragedy brought about by Hamas's refusal to surrender.

Biden's closest friends knew "the real war" that most "preoccupied him," as one interviewee told Woodward, was neither Ukraine nor Israel but instead the endless troubles of his eldest surviving son, Hunter. As anyone who's had the opportunity to peruse Garrett Ziegler's unforgettable, 600-plus page *Report on the Biden Laptop*, which presents the contents of that infamous device in all-too-richly illustrated hard copy form knows, the younger Biden spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on prostitutes and drugs while leading an utterly degraded life mired in serial misogyny. Woodward writes that Secretary of State Blinken "knew that Hunter's struggles had derailed Biden emotionally much, much more than any outsider or the public realized" and that the president believed only his elevation to the White House had led federal prosecutors to pursue his son's criminal offenses. "The guilt was overwhelming."

Although almost all of *War* focuses on Biden and his inner circle, the book both begins and ends with Donald Trump—just like Biden's own presidency. In the most widely reported statements in *War*, on March 6, 2023, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley approached Woodward at a Washington reception to warn that "No one has ever been as dangerous to this country as Donald Trump. ... We have got to stop him. ... He's a total fascist." Adds Woodward, "I will never forget the intensity of his worry."

In contrast, Woodward recounts the perspective of retired Army lieutenant general Keith Kellogg, whose observations match up with those described by former CENTCOM commander General Frank McKenzie in his [superb memoir](#), *The Melting Point*. "Kellogg regularly argued that Trump was a different kind of person out of the spotlight. He could listen and actually wanted to hear every voice in the room." Woodward nonetheless declares that Trump "is unfit to lead the country" and indeed "far worse than Richard Nixon," Woodward's original nemesis.

Only twice in *War* does Woodward stumble badly, but both are doozies. Based on only a sole, unnamed "Trump aide," Woodward writes that out of office Trump has had "multiple" phone conversations with Russian tyrant Putin, in fact, "maybe as many as seven." *Maybe?* In his acknowledgments Woodward praises his editor for probing even his "smallest word choices," and his copy editor for "sensing error and imprecision," but it's difficult to fathom how experienced editors allowed the phrase "maybe as many" to slip into print.

Lastly, Woodward asserts that "the legacy of the Biden presidency" will be "steady and purposeful leadership." Few if any readers of *War*, apart from Tony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, are likely to concur in that judgment, so long as they recall the indelible images of Biden's disastrous abandonment of Afghanistan and his failure to ensure a victorious Ukraine. What a punk.

War

by Bob Woodward

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David J. Garrow's books include the Pulitzer Prize-winning Martin Luther King Jr. biography Bearing the Cross and Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama.