

# **Charlie Wilson's War: Cavalier and Facile, or Politically Relevant?**

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Donald Johns' UWP 102D class, Writing in International Relations, signified a final fusion of my English and International Relations majors. For this particular assignment, Dr. Johns challenged the class to dig up the truth about a political figure portrayed in film. Thus I watched Charlie Wilson's War lying in bed on a winter night in Davis, hoping to discover some new knowledge and perspective from the film. By the end I probably reacted in just the way the film wanted its viewers to: I was angered and inspired to learn more. I wanted this essay to be different; I wanted to feel confidence when handing it in, rather than a timid hesitation. Thus I took Dr. Johns' advice to refine my paper with many rounds of editing. The essay is meant for an audience familiar with the film Charlie Wilson's War.*

—Megan Baer

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Megan Baer wrote this essay for UWP 102D: Writing in International Relations. The prompt, largely fashioned by previous instructors Nancy Morrow and Eric Schroeder, asked students to review and critique "a film that puts international events in some sort of imaginative or fictional context." They were challenged to examine the credibility of the ways events are treated in the film and to consider how the film might "shape or even distort the attitudes and opinions of viewers about world affairs." Finally, they were to review responses by commentators and critics from a range of perspectives. In her essay, Megan Baer integrates a healthy range of sources into a coherent discussion that is both candid and fair in its assessment of the film, its maker (Mike Nichols), and its protagonist (Charlie Wilson). The essay emerges as a stimulating think-piece. It explores the power of the artistic imagination to test and alter our judgments about history. At the same time, it illustrates the ability of cogent criticism to cause us to revisit and revise our judgments of aesthetic products, including cinematic narratives.*

—Donald Johns, University Writing Program

THE STORY OF *CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR* IS PERFECT for Hollywood. It features a tall Texan playboy who uses James Bond–like powers to achieve the seemingly impossible, and the largest secret war in history. The story also includes many high-profile characters, like Dan Rather, George Crile, Joanne Herring, and Gust Avrakotos. Each of these people played a role in shaping the history of Afghanistan, a country now central in the gaze of the world's superpower. Yet besides just entertainment, Crile explains in his book, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History*, that this story should also be observed as a “cautionary tale” (Crile ix). Some criticize the film for dealing too lightly with calamitous events. Yet what many argue is the film's weakness may also be its source of strength. With today's twenty-four-hour news cycle of horrendous natural and social disasters, the average American may be hesitant to voluntarily watch ninety minutes of pain for entertainment. Instead of seeking to appall the viewer with heart-wrenching visual experiences, the director, Mike Nichols, chooses a more comedic approach to convey this turbulent and unfinished story. The significance of this tale comes from its relevance and take-home message for the viewer. The film serves as a subtle warning that the world of international politics is like an ecosystem: actions taken to alter the state of a country may stimulate unforeseen consequences.

### **The Making of the Story**

ONE OF THE KEY PLAYERS in the making of Congressman Wilson's story is George Crile, who worked for CBS News for over twenty-five years as both a producer and a correspondent (CBS). His book about Wilson was at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for several months. The inspiration for the book began with an interview of Wilson in a 1988 *Sixty Minutes* profile (CBS). Crile then spent thirteen years reporting on this story. After the events of September 11, 2001, he hurried to complete his book, because suddenly it was important for the American public to know that they had funded the transformation of sandaled Afghans into trained fighters.

The film version of *Charlie Wilson's War* does not veer far from the facts of the actual story. True to Wilson's real-life story, when Wilson was young his neighbor did kill his dog, Wilson did watch a Dan Rather documentary about Afghanistan in a Las Vegas hot tub with nude women, did take a Texan belly dancer with him to Cairo to seduce the defense

minister, and did appropriate over one billion dollars for Afghanistan, which was matched by Saudi Arabia. Yet the film is not as interested in history as it is in telling a story and building a character.

The film does leave some holes in the story. For example, it does not give any reason why Saudi Arabia would match funds sent into Afghanistan to help fight the Soviet forces. However, in actuality, Saudi Arabia and the United States have relatively good foreign relations. The US Department of State website states that Saudi Arabia is an “important partner in the campaign against terrorism, providing military, diplomatic, and financial cooperation” (“Saudi Arabia”). In contrast, Soviet–Saudi Arabian relations have been strained since Stalin cut them off in 1938. During the Cold War, the setting for Wilson’s story, the Saudis were displeased with the Soviet Union’s treatment of Muslims and felt endangered by the Soviet’s invasion of Afghanistan and their arms sales to extremist Arab and Marxist regimes in South Yemen and Ethiopia (Katz).

Another of the questions that the film does not address is the source of Joanne Herring’s interest in Afghanistan. The film portrays her as a strong-willed, seductive, affluent, evangelical Christian, but gives no direct source of her intense ambition to help people in a far-away, obscure country. However, in actual life, Joanne Herring was the “honorary consul” to both Pakistan and Morocco (Feldman).

### **Good Time Charlie**

FOR JOANNE HERRING’S UNCONVENTIONAL love interest, the film stars Tom Hanks as Charlie Wilson, the Bible Belt Congressman from eastern Texas (Crile 2). Wilson’s character may be properly summarized in the toast that he made at his sixtieth birthday, to “Friends, to power, to passion, to black lace” (Crile 2). Many reporters, politicians, and women have stories to tell about his fearless character. The *London Times* calls Charlie the “hot tub heretic who played with history” and reports that he once called a feminist congresswoman “Babycakes” (Bone).

Viewers might suspect that the film exaggerates Wilson’s wild character, yet in fact many observed that he was actually even wilder in real life. The film shows Wilson drinking almost non-stop; however, unlike Wilson in real life, it never shows his character mentally or physically altered by the effects of alcohol. The real Wilson did get into problems with alcohol and was even caught in a drunken hit and run accident. As the film shows, Wilson filled his office with beautiful women, who came

to be known as “Charlie’s Angels.” Yet reporter and friend of Wilson, John Kanelis, writes that he never saw these women behave less than professionally (Kanelis). As the film shows, Wilson was not convicted for cocaine use in the Las Vegas hot tub (the same one where his interest in Afghanistan was sparked by the Dan Rather documentary). About that night, he commented: “The girls had cocaine . . . it was total happiness. And both of them had ten long, red fingernails with an endless supply of beautiful white powder” (Crile). Thus Wilson did fit his nickname of “Good Time Charlie” (Benham).

Besides getting him into trouble, Wilson’s charm was also one of his greatest sources of power. He was “both an anomaly and a paragon” (Scott) and “a rogue but an honest one” (LaSalle). His charm granted him the ability to make people view him not as a “middle-aged scoundrel” but instead as a “good-hearted adolescent, guilty of little more than youthful excess” (Bone). Dan Rather summarizes Wilson’s strong personality with, “It is the rare congressman who, by dint of personality, persistence and country smarts, did something that literally altered history on the global stage” (Bone).

Wilson’s actual life mirrors that of a Zen Master story like the one Gust tells at the end of the film. The point of this Zen Master story is that even hardships can be turned into blessings, and vice versa. Wilson’s legend may have started with a grumpy city council member who poisoned his dog. When Wilson (Hanks) recounts this detail of his life, the film paints this scene as a somber moment between Wilson and his secretary, with a hazy background and stirring music. Yet in response to that sad event, Wilson got involved in politics and left his fingerprints on the history of the world. Wilson won twelve consecutive terms in Congress with his slogan, “Charlie gets it done.”

## **The Covert War**

*CHARLIE WILSON’S WAR* PRESENTS AN APPROPRIATE emphasis on the secret war in Afghanistan. The CIA fought and won this war without the notice of the American public, managing to avoid the public debates and street protests that accompany most publicized wars (Crile ix). Even in the official declassified documents of 1981, the US Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied any “knowledge of U.S. Arms purchases from Egypt for distribution to the Afghan rebels” and announced that there was no “Pakistani assistance to Afghan rebels” (*Digital*). Though the US officially denied its

role in arming Afghani fighters, the Mujahedeen, this war in Afghanistan was the “catalyst” that brought about the fall of the Soviet Empire (Crile).

Thoughtful viewers of *Charlie Wilson's War* may be stirred to ponder the pros and cons of a secret war. Because it is a war that the US did not claim credit for, the Mujahedeen and other Muslims did not view the US as a key part of their success. Crile reports that for the Mujahedeen, the credit for winning the war went to Allah, “the only superpower they acknowledge” (Crile ix). This secrecy has led to unforeseen ramifications in the relations between the US and Afghanistan. Today the US faces strained relations with Afghanistan as US forces attempt to fight for stability in the region. Afghans are known for a severe dislike of any foreign invaders, and any fond memory of the CIA's covert war is faded at best. In Crile's book, he opens with an author's note that explains that even though we still know little about the 9/11 tragedy, we do know that a common “denominator” for all of the nineteen terrorists was that they spent time in Afghanistan.

Most critics and experts on Wilson's life do not stoop to blame him for contributing to 9/11. Crile writes that the real Wilson said, “it didn't register with me for a week or two that this thing was all based in my mountains” (Crile 508). In 2007, Wilson told *Time* magazine, “We were fighting the evil empire. It would have been like not supplying the Soviets against Hitler in World War II . . . who the hell had ever heard of the Taliban then?” (Bone). Thus, much like Wilson's own life, the events in Afghanistan unfolded like a Zen Master story, because what seemed like a blessing turned into a complication.

### **Criticism and Controversy**

THIS FILM HAS RECEIVED MUCH ATTENTION from critics, reviewers, and historians. One prominent critique is that the film is too cavalier with such a murky issue. A. O. Scott, writer for the *New York Times*, deems *Charlie Wilson's War* “more of a hoot than any picture dealing with the bloody, protracted fight between the Soviet Army and the Afghan Mujahedeen has any right to be” (Scott). Another critic argues that the serious scenes in the movie often feel too “facile” (Puig). Yet Scott also notes that the film does well to combat the notion that “American heroism resides only in square-jawed, melancholy stoicism” (Scott). In this film the good guys are not always serious, or even moral. The director is known for political

comedy, not gut-wrenching political thrillers. Scott argues that the film weaves “fun” into the “fabric of freedom” (Scott).

Another main source of criticism and controversy about the film is its ending. One reviewer complains that the director does not trust the intelligence of the viewers enough to show them the next step of the plot. She argues that the film “does not approach that whole millennial nexus of religion and geography and blood” (Biancolli). The film shies away from giving the viewer a hard dose of reality. Instead it seeks to expose and satirize a different side of politics. It focuses on the complex networks of politicians, wealthy elites, and beautiful girls in the weaving of the story of the war in Afghanistan, rather than on the convoluted and debated ramifications of that war. Most of the film’s plot is set in exclusive government offices, high-profile meetings, or posh parties. While it does take the viewer on a stirring trip to Afghanistan, this trip only occupies a few minutes of the movie and is just sufficient to evoke sympathy for the protagonist’s cause.

The end of the film is not the end of the story. The film closes with the anticlimax of Wilson fighting for scraps of funding to send for the rebuilding of Afghanistan. Crile reports that before the defeat of the Soviets, Wilson told his fellow Congressmen that the Afghan plight was a “morally unambiguous cause.” However after the Soviets left the country, the ambiguity set in (Crile 513). At the close of 1993, the Clinton administration cut off the Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Program, which was the one organized effort to rebuild this ravaged country (Crile). Crile writes that “there were no roads, no schools, just a destroyed country—and the United States was washing its hands of any responsibility” (Crile 522). After this void came Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the tragedy of 9/11. When the US fired missiles at potential sites of Osama bin Laden’s camp, one of those missiles hit the very spot where the brazen Texas Congressman had slept a couple of decades earlier (Crile 522). Crile writes,

By 1990 the Afghan freedom fighters had suddenly and frighteningly gone back to form, reemerging as nothing more than feuding warlords obsessed with settling generations-old scores. The difference was that they were now armed with hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of weapons and explosives of every conceivable type. The justification for the huge CIA operation had been to halt Soviet

aggression, not to take sides in a tribal war—certainly not to transform the killing capacity of these warriors. (Crile 513)

Much like an ecosystem and a Zen Master story, the US discovered that interference comes with indefinite consequences. The original cut of the film included a picture of the Pentagon in flames on 9/11, in order to send a blatant message about the consequences of the failure to rebuild Afghanistan. Due to the insistence of Joanne Herring, this image was removed, but the message still pervades the film's somber final moments.

## **Relevance**

NOT ONLY IS *CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR* AN INTRIGUING film, but its message is relevant to the global state of affairs today. One journalist warns viewers that "Afghanistan once again has fallen and once again the world is turning away in frustration—Charlie's lessons still aren't being learnt" (Midgley). With this sad backdrop, perhaps the greatest strength of *Charlie Wilson's War* is its subtle potential to cause the viewer to contemplate the effect of political tampering with the international ecosystem. In the film we see that even with the best of intentions, James Bond-like politicians have limited control over the effects of their actions. This concept is translated into the film as its take-home message and one of its overall themes.

Today it is with regret that Wilson's ambition is remembered. True, the Soviets left Afghanistan, but that was not enough to ensure stability in the region. Even the current Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, admits that the government should have paid attention to Wilson's pleadings for increased help in Afghanistan (Crile). Crile laments that "one can only hope . . . the United States will recognize its obligation to help in the rebuilding of this ravaged land" (Crile 533). Though *Charlie Wilson's War* is a dramatized Hollywood film, it presents a valuable lesson for a country still dealing with the repercussions of Afghanistan's instability. As the viewers of *Charlie Wilson's War* learn, actions taken that alter the international ecosystem can unfold without foreseeable or satisfying results.

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