

# Book Review: “War” by Bob Woodward

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## The veteran journalist dishes on the Jordanian king’s “man cave,” Biden’s pique at both Netanyahu and Abbas, and Harris’s public versus private diplomatic style.

If newspapers are the first draft of history, the books of *Washington Post* associate editor Bob Woodward can claim to be the second draft. The quotes from major players are what newspaper reporters on a breaking story can only dream of. *War*, Woodward’s new book on the inner workings of the Biden White House, is a worthy second draft, although his story should perhaps have been better entitled *Wars* with an *s*.

When he started writing, the Ukraine war was the dominant issue, but the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel has grabbed more headlines since. And, for continuity and no doubt commercial timeliness, Woodward now includes the Harris/Trump presidential contest as another zone of combat.

The Woodward style is well-known and arguably unique. As he himself explains: “All interviews for this book were conducted under the journalist ground rule of ‘deep background.’ This means that all the information could be used but I would not say who provided it.” The reader is left to ponder why the sources said what they told Woodward. Also, why did Woodward believe what he was being told? After all, it is another journalist ground rule *not* to allow yourself to be manipulated by your sources.

Woodward’s prejudices are clear. Of Trump, he “is not only the wrong man for the presidency, he is unfit to run the country.” For Putin, he quotes a CIA profile—“defined by his extreme insecurity and imperial ambition.”

The book is 370 pages, plus sources notes and index, divided into no less than 77 chapters, a few as short as less than a page. It’s the sort of book for which many readers may end up flagging pages in one way or another—the index didn’t help me find the interesting bits. I developed league tables to entice potential readers:

Most loquacious of sources: Despite their supposed anonymity, much of the book would appear to be the memories of Secretary of State Tony Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, CIA Director Bill Burns, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and the NSC's Middle East Coordinator Brett McGurk.

Most bad language: Biden would appear to be the clear winner of this doubtful prize. “‘Bibi, what the f\*\*k?’ Biden yelled into the phone at Netanyahu,” is a good example. Nevertheless, one wonders why a “friend” of the president would tell Woodward that Biden had told him: “I have spent five hours going back and forth, back and forth on the phone with two of the biggest f\*\*king assholes in the world—Bibi Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas [the Palestinian leader].” (Woodward spelt out the f-words.)

Most surprising omission: There is no mention of the ill-health last winter of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin when he had surgery followed soon after by days in intensive care. It later emerged that the White House had been kept in the dark. Austin is described as the “star pick” of the Biden Administration by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Most revealing of Biden's declining health: The June 2024 presidential debate with Trump caused Biden to withdraw his candidacy, but for how long had his mental health been so questionable? Woodward recounts details of three different fundraisers a year earlier, in June 2023, when participants later told him the president was “like your 87-year-old senile grandfather” and “he never completed a sentence.” In May 2024, at a Silicon Valley fundraiser for about 30 people, guests thought it “weird” that he used a teleprompter.

Most likely to rebound badly on the apparent source: Secretary of State Tony Blinken was in Saudi Arabia as part of a Middle East trip immediately after the October 7 attacks on Israel with the hope of seeing Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. He was told to be ready for a meeting either later that night or early the next morning. MBS, as he is known, kept them waiting until 7 a.m. Blinken's comment: “MBS was nothing more than a spoiled child.”

Most curious anecdote: Blinken visited Jordan and had dinner with King Abdullah “in the King's ‘man cave’—a handsome room in his home with a bar set-up, but no alcohol.”

Most intriguing line: Senator Lindsey Graham and Netanyahu “had scheduled a quiet negotiation between Netanyahu and a Saudi ambassador in Tel Aviv in November 2023 [the month after the Hamas attack on Israel]. It would be a historic moment.”

Woodward's overall judgement: “...there were failures and mistakes...But...I believe President Biden and his team will be largely studied in history as an example of steady and purposeful leadership.”

Biggest failure? “Despite more than 50 planning meetings, the Biden administration's [2021] withdrawal from Afghanistan spiraled into devastating chaos. They had failed to anticipate contingencies and plan for worst-case scenarios. When they did plan, it was too late.”

On Kamala Harris: “The Harris approach was diplomatic in private and forceful in public.”

*This article originally appeared on the Georgetown website*

*(<https://georgetown.com/articles/2024/10/21/book-review-war-by-bob-woodward/>)*. ❖

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