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 Burned by Woodward's Fire
 by Leslie H. Gelb
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The president and his team cooperated with the famed author's new book. Leslie H. Gelb on the fallout—and how Obama's Wars shows the U.S. is stuck in an open-ended conflict.

Lots of White House officials observed Bob Woodward, Mr. First Draft of History, repeatedly and boldly slipping behind the closed doors of President Obama's most intimate advisers. They all knew what was happening. The president's men were helping The Washington Post's sleuth write "the inside story" of how the boss masterfully managed the most trying of Herculean labors—the war in Afghanistan. There's only one very big problem in dealing with Woodward in this manner: Once the boss opens the doors to spilling the secrets, many of his subordinates feel liberated to "tell their side of the story." By the time each has exhausted tales of his own heroism and the shortcomings of his fellow senior officials, well, no one looks terribly heroic.

Let's start with Obama, who emerges from the pages of Obama's Wars as he is—brilliant, emotionless, abstract, focused, and confused, a Chicago law-school professor in presidents' clothes. He obviously wanted Woodward to portray him as a brilliant intellectual leader of a government that was not giving him too much help in solving the Afghan mystery, but that he trudged on, doing the best anyone possibly could under these terrible circumstances.

The worst circumstance, as Team Obama alleged to Woodward, was that the Pentagon leadership and the U.S. generals did not give him the real choices he was asking for. He wanted options for troop increases below, even far below, what the generals were giving him. He didn't get them. He wanted a strategy for how U.S. forces would be drawn down after they reached their projected peak of about 100,000 (more than three times the number George W. Bush left him). The military didn't provide him with that, either.

As they say in Missouri, "Give me a break." If the commander in chief of the United States doesn't know how to get what he wants from the U.S. military, he might want to do something about that. And some of the many generals in the White House who he picked to guide him might have told him how to go about that task. To cut to the chase: Obama didn't understand what he had to do—tell Defense Secretary Bob Gates to tell the generals either they meet the president's wishes or they will be fired. Republican presidents do just that. And so, as Woodward describes, Obama had to write the strategy all by himself.

This was and still is an awful situation that springs from two sources. One is that the president has just not been clear enough about his thinking and objectives for Afghanistan, and the military and the rest of us must have real clarity to pursue wars. Woodward has this right. Here are a few Obama quotes that illustrate the problem. The president told Woodward that he didn't think about the Afghan war in the "classic" terms of the U.S. winning or losing. "I think about it more in terms of: Do you successfully prosecute a strategy that results in the country being stronger rather than weaker at the end?" What on earth does that mean? Or try this one, to Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) about whether the July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawal was firm: "I have to say that. I can't let this be a war without end, and I can't lose the whole Democratic Party." Does that mean Obama really believes in the war, but his party doesn't? Or to White House aides: "This needs to be a plan about how we're going to hand it off and get out of Afghanistan." So, if he wanted such a plan, he should have gotten such a plan. He is president after all.

Which leads to the second problem: When a president is not clear about a tough problem, the military smells vacillations. And they sure don't like vacillation when it comes to dispatching their men and women to war. Americans don't fathom well the military mentality. The military in most countries throughout history doesn't like to go to war; they like to build up their arms and overall strength. But once in war, they want only more troops, fewer restrictions on their use, and above all, victory, victory, victory. Since Vietnam, they smell only vacillation among Democrats, and they don't like it. For their part, Democrats see insubordination and worse among the military toward them, and they don't care for the suits either. It's not a happy circumstance. Woodward didn't explore this underlying reality, which is critical for Americans to understand.

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The White House clash with the military could get worse over the latest news about Gen. Stanley McChrystal's firing over naughty things said about the White House to a reporter. According to a preliminary Army investigation, the general—and

perhaps even his senior Army aides—were not the sources of those nasty quotes. It was some other guys—you know, the usual culprits, the Navy and civilians. There will be further formal inquiries on this, but nothing good will come of them. There's another important thread running throughout the Woodward account that, I believe, he gets more wrong than right. That is, Woodward's repeated insistence of open and bitter policy brawls in the good old Situation Room (the inner sanctum for White House meetings) over Afghan policy. Mr. Instant Historian paints a picture of a war of all against all. My information has always been that there was relative agreement on major policy. Based on my sources, there is no doubt that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Bob Gates, and Joint Chiefs Chairman Mike Mullen were almost always quite cordial and in full lock step. They, along with the NSC Adviser Jim Jones and field commanders like General McChrystal and General Petraeus, are the key players. Of course, Vice President Joe Biden and Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel were the only regular critics of where policy was heading. The generals did lobby for their positions in public—in advance of presidential decisions. And that's a big no-no. But by that standard, almost all Obama's top advisers did as much. The day after his West Point speech last December, where he set the firm date of July 2011 to begin unspecified U.S. troop withdrawals, almost all the advisers publicly stated that maybe one didn't have to take this date too seriously, that everything was "conditions based." That group of rebels included Gates and Clinton.

So, if anything, most of Obama's top counselors were more or less united—sometimes against where he seemed to be going. Here is what Petraeus had to say to Woodward on the subject of goals, and it's a stunner: "You have to recognize also that I don't think you win this war. I think you keep fighting. It's a little bit like Iraq, actually.... Yes, there has been enormous progress in Iraq. But there are still horrific attacks in Iraq, and you have to stay vigilant. You have to stay after it. This is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives." The brilliant general said as much to others over the last year. It's enough to knock your socks off.


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Doubtless, President Obama does not want to fight an open-ended war. He's sworn to that time and again, and I believe him, despite his history of calling for "victory" and "defeat" of the Taliban and al Qaeda. But what the Woodward book demonstrates is that Obama and his team just don't know how to get from here to there. So far, there are no heroes to this narrative, only self-described heroic skeptics of the war and warriors who would fight on forever.

Leslie H. Gelb, a former New York Times columnist and senior government official, is author of Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy (HarperCollins 2009), a book that shows how to think about and use power in the 21st century. He is president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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