

Plan of Attack by Bob Woodward.
Simon and Schuster 2004.

Bob Woodward wrote two powerful and highly informative books about the Clinton White House and with Plan of Attack matches that number about the administration of George W. Bush. The first, Bush at War, covered the immediate aftermath of the attacks on America by Al-Qaeda in September 2001, the second, Plan of Attack, is concerned with Iraq.

The decision to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein, against the wishes of influential members of the United Nations and countless citizens throughout the world, is already shaping up to be one of the decisive acts of the 21st century, and as its immediate ramifications grow ever more terrible it is easy to believe that it will have an impact on the world for decades to come, and possibly much longer.

Bob Woodward, adopting his customary forensic style of journalism, describes in minute detail the internal process in the United States leading to war: the debates in the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA and the National Security Council. With the unrivalled access borne of his own stature Woodward cites direct, attributable comments of all the major protagonists, President Bush, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, and the un-attributable comments of many more, including those in the security services.

Plan of Attack is an – as yet – unsurpassed account of what went on before the final buttons were pressed and the attack on Saddam Hussein was launched. It lays to rest some of the more fantastic theories about the Administration that were expounded before the war began, but details the high tension between many of the key players, not least Rumsfeld and Powell, whose departments shared a deep, mutual and totally unhelpful dislike, and highlights the powerful role of Vice President Cheney, who, if anyone deserves such a soubriquet, emerges from the book as its hard-line, immovable villain.

The invasion of Iraq – with which Great Britain is now inextricably linked – is the moral and geo-political issue of our time, and as such deserves the highest degree of scrutiny and study. Plan of Attack is a most valuable contribution to this process. I await with anticipation, and trepidation, Woodward's third volume.

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