

The War Within – A Secret White House History 2006-2008 by Bob Woodward.
Simon and Schuster 2008.

The War Within is –presumably – the last volume of Bob Woodward's extraordinary micro-history of the disastrous presidency of George W Bush.

Woodward – as might be expected from a Washington journalist of his unique pedigree – has had access to the key movers and shakers throughout his detailing the real story of the Bush administration, up to and including Bush himself: most of the information, however, for reasons that are obvious, comes from the less well-known but nevertheless hugely significant players in the story.

The War Within is divided into two parts, with an epilogue and a vital glossary explaining, inter alia, the plenitude of acronyms that always fill any volume which deals with the US military. The clue to the story within the book is immediately provided by its title which indicates, during the final two years of the administration, and possibly even longer than that, the widespread sense that America's Iraq adventure had gone disastrously wrong and the increasingly desperate attempts that were made to turn things around.

The War Within also brings out both the limitations and huge abilities of various American military personnel, their high level of intellect and qualification and the way in which they were all too frequently stymied by the politicians who were their ultimate masters. The book also reinforces the toxic nexus of Rumsfeld and Cheney, and the way in which the former strove to marginalise the State Department, both under Secretary Powell and Condi Rice; it does however argue that the Strangelovian influence on Bush of Cheney was never as great as the conspiracy theorists averred. What is also clear is that the US found it almost impossible to acquire responsible and straight Iraqi partners as they sought to rebuild the country after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, that they were frequently hampered by the way in which Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, a Shi'ite with no real political experience, conducted his affairs and regularly appeased the Shia majority at the expense of an angry Sunni minority.

The War Within, and the books that have preceded it, demonstrate all too clearly what happens when monomaniac politicians pursue an idea to the detriment of common sense, global realpolitik and international stability, and above all at the cost of the lives of their countrymen in the military who have no option but to go where their country sends them and do what they are told.

I mourn the end of this extraordinary, essential history of the presidency of George W Bush, but rejoice that the administration which has been its subject has now been consigned, with its leader, to the depths of the dustbin of history.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh