

CHARLIE WILSON'S WHOPPERS

Arthur Kent

Arthur Kent covered the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. He was the Canadian television journalist who, as he writes, “tramped across Afghanistan, filming the exploits of the mujahideen guerrillas.” Now, in a moment of art imitating life, some of his footage and voice-overs ended up in *Charlie Wilson's War*, the Hollywood film version of how the Soviets got the boot, largely because of US funding of covert operations, supplying arms and rockets to the insurgents. Except nobody asked permission to use his footage, and the story told in the film is only loosely connected to actual events.

Dans les années 1980, Arthur Kent a couvert l'occupation soviétique de l'Afghanistan en tant que journaliste de la télévision canadienne chargé de « parcourir le pays pour filmer les exploits des moudjahidin », écrit-il. Entre réalité et fiction, certaines des images qu'il avait tournées, accompagnées de ses commentaires hors champ, se retrouvent aujourd'hui dans le film *La guerre selon Charlie Wilson*, version hollywoodienne de l'expulsion des Soviétiques du pays, intervenue en grande partie avec l'aide des États-Unis, qui ont financé les opérations clandestines des insurgés tout en leur fournissant armes et roquettes. Le hic : personne n'a demandé l'autorisation d'utiliser ces images, et le film n'a qu'un faible rapport avec les événements tels qu'ils se sont déroulés.

So it's off to the movies, and why not? Friends have e-mailed to say “you must see *Charlie Wilson's War* — you're in it!”

Strange, I don't recall contributing even a cameo to a \$75 million Hollywood movie. On the way to the multiplex, I have to wonder: did I hold my own with Tom Hanks and Philip Seymour Hoffman? Was I in the moment with Julia Roberts? How did I perform under Mike Nichols' direction, and did I lift Aaron Sorkin's dialogue off the script?

But no, it turns out to be that other persona — the real one. That prerecorded, archived, 1980s me; that camera-packing reporter. The guy who tramped across Afghanistan, filming the exploits of the mujahideen guerrillas, and regularly provided bombardment fodder for the Soviet Union's occupation forces.

No Oscar hopes, no red carpets — just that old Red Army. Yet there's my voice-over, about half a minute of it, along with four of my shots, helping to tell the story not long before the closing credits come up — gulp! — without me.

But let's put aside, for the moment, little things like credit and copyright. The motion picture is based on the book, *Charlie Wilson's War*, written by an accomplished CBS reporter named George Crile. I was fortunate enough to meet George and appear in a panel discussion with him in New York when the book was published. His death at the age of 61 was a huge loss, not only to his wonderful family, but to our craft, too. And it robs me of the opportunity

I'd most dearly like to have right now: shooting the breeze with George, a fellow trooper from the circus of US network news, and debating the merits of Hollywood's treatment of his book.

I'm certain George would stress, as he did when we met, that *Charlie Wilson's War* was not intended to be an all-encompassing account of the Afghan catastrophe. Against that, however, Nichols' and Hanks' big-screen treatment sounds the clarion of historical fact. In the profuse publicity and in the film itself, the producers tell audiences that this is a real story about a real Congressman, Charlie Wilson, who wheedled, massaged and flannelled a significant covert military aid program out of that Sleepy Hollow on the Potomac known as Washington, DC.

In selling itself this way, the motion picture has at least a passing obligation to accuracy, however limited the scope of its story. And there's an exciting opportunity here: to reveal to Americans, with an entertaining drama, how it is that more of their tax dollars were invested in Afghanistan than in any other CIA covert operation to that time, and yet it resulted, on September 11th, 2001, in the most outrageous act of blowback the US has experienced — so far.

Sadly, it's an opportunity the makers of *Charlie Wilson's War* failed miserably to grasp. Instead they spent \$75 million and 97 minutes to unveil a weird and most unwelcome

innovation in the movies — a textual anti-climax. The final frame lights up with Charlie Wilson's words: "we fucked up the endgame."

Which is, of course, where the real Afghan story begins. But the reality and the lessons of blowback are clearly too complicated a tale for Hanks and Nichols, so *Charlie Wilson's War* contents itself with a romp through the corridors and bedrooms of American power. Occasionally,

Morocco's Atlas Mountains are a strong substitute for the valleys of Afghanistan, and the expanse of the refugee camps is impressive. But where are the Afghan faces? Wrapping a few turbans on Moroccan Berbers just doesn't cut it, and the Keystone-Cops-style mujahideen Stinger crews are — unintentionally — a laughing stock of botched detail and performance.

Afghanistan gets a look-in. Special effects create menacing renditions of Soviet helicopter gunships, but the Afghan civilian victims in the film's short, sharp attack scenes don't come off as anything more than luckless day-players. Are they running from a gunship, or from the director shouting at them to get on with it and die so he can cut back to DC?

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The movie is emphatically false in its reference to the CIA's dealings with Afghanistan's most accomplished resistance commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud, the "Lion of the Panjshir." History tells us that Massoud was constantly undercut by the CIA's middleman in its covert anti-Soviet aid program, the Pakistan

military's Inter-Services Intelligence branch (the ISI). The Pakistanis feared Massoud: a charismatic Afghan nationalist, he stood the best chance of uniting his country — which risked presenting Pakistan with a new regional competitor.

So rather than channelling US aid to Massoud, an ethnic Tajik, the ISI handed over American arms and money to fundamentalist militants from Afghanistan's majority Pashtun tribes,

notably ghouls like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani. Both these men now top America's list of most wanted Afghan terrorists. Yet under Charlie Wilson's CIA scheme, they received — in every sense — the Lion's share of Stingers, other arms and cash.

You wouldn't know that from watching Nichols' movie. Neither Hekmatyar nor Haqqani are mentioned. But when Philip Seymour Hoffman and his CIA sidekicks are depicted in the bowels of their Langley, Virginia headquarters, they conclude that if anyone received Stingers, it should be Ahmed Shah Massoud. (Amid raucous laughter, the spooks transpose an infamous Afghan sexual slight about Pashtun Kandaharis to Massoud's predominantly Tajik Panshiris. This is not only unforgivably dumb, it will reinforce the view among Tajik Afghans that Washington continues in its prejudice against non-Pashtuns — a conviction borne out by the Bush administration's stacking of the Karzai regime with corrupt Pashtun stooges.)

Ironically, there's no stronger proof of the film's misrepresentation of Massoud than the television news story the producers raided for this correspondent's voice track and footage.

This was a 10-minute piece I wrote and narrated specifically for BBC2's *Newsnight* program in 1986. There is only one place the producers of *Charlie Wilson's War* could have unearthed a videotape copy of this broadcast: in the BBC archives.

In 1986, I trekked across the Hindu Kush to Massoud's haunts in northern Afghanistan. With camera rolling, I asked him about US military aid. This was the commander's response, as transcribed from the *Newsnight* story: "I've heard nothing, seen nothing of the Stinger rockets. My personal view and that of the mujahideen, and of all the people of Afghanistan is this. The West always talks, but they don't take any practical steps to reduce the

problems and pains of my people. We hear on the radio about the help that is on the way, but all we end up with is some medical supplies, or very small financial help. It's negligible. We haven't seen anything else."

The man wasn't kidding. Twice during my stay, we were bombed by low-flying Soviet SU-25 ground attack planes. Massoud's men defended themselves with one heavy machine-gun, captured from the Russians. The guerrillas emerged unscathed from their soufs or shelters, but 11 civilians were killed in the second raid.

While it's true that Massoud eventually received a few token Stingers, more than half the estimated 1,000 missiles channelled through the ISI to the mujahideen ended up with Hekmatyar, Haqqani and other extremist commanders. These brigands accounted, too, for most of 300-odd Stingers that went missing after the Soviet withdrawal, forcing the CIA to institute a costly buy-back program that rewards the thieves with \$100,000 or more for each missile. It's unknown how many Stingers are still out there, whether their expired battery packs can be replaced, or how their sensors and warheads would now perform.



Courtesy, Arthur Kent

Canadian journalist Arthur Kent, who has covered Afghanistan since the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, here in Panjshir Valley in November 2001, just before the Taliban were forced out of Kabul. He was filming a documentary for the History Channel in the US. In a case of art imitating life, one of his freelance pieces from the Soviet era ended up in *Charlie Wilson's War*.

The movie ignores these facts, while triumphantly reeling off a list of statistics. A ticker tape states how many helicopters were shot down in 1987, how many jets and tanks destroyed in 1988. Excuse me, Tom and Mike, but I was there. Reliable numbers were the first victims of the Afghan war. The Russians, the guerrillas, the Pakistanis and the Americans — all of them brazenly fiddled the stats. The CIA had no observers on the ground in Afghanistan. Sure the Soviet military bled, but the ISI goosed the mujahideen's strike ratio to keep American aid flowing.

Charlie Wilson's War isn't the first Hollywood picture to choose myth over

substance and it won't be the last. But the callous ease with which these millionaire moviemakers pillage the archives for their fable is a tendency, in Tinseltown, that factual filmmakers should take measures to redress. I know a lot of moviegoers who sat through the credits of *Charlie Wilson's War* just to see who recorded the battlefield footage. So who gets screen credit? Networks and news agencies and image archives — an almost indecipherable cluster of logos and bugs and acronyms.

But these gripping sequences aren't the work of companies, they were filmed by men and women. Some were professional freelancers, others adven-

turers and daredevils. Many were young Afghans striving to document their country's resistance to foreign oppression. Nearly all were underpaid and they frequently risked their lives. Yet their contribution to the historical record languishes without proper acknowledgment, as the makers of *Charlie Wilson's War* so disgracefully demonstrate.

Especially sad is the treatment of our most accomplished colleague, British cameraman Andy Skrzypkowiak. A former British commando, Andy was the crafty shooter who captured those close-quarter shots of the mujahideen ambushing Russian road convoys. His work for ITN and BBC documenting

Massoud's fighters is profoundly admired by his peers. This rugged, driven man gave his life to his art: gunmen loyal to Massoud's rival, Hekmatyar, captured and killed Andy. His images live on, but here, sadly, they serve mainly the hyper-commercial zeal of the networks and studios, and the suits are evidently too busy counting the cash to give credit where credit is due.

I can hear those execs and their minions now, chiming in with that old Hollywood wheeze: "Well this isn't a documentary." But what, exactly, is *Charlie Wilson's War*? Take a look at NBC/Universal's publicity, then the moviemakers' interviews, and the resulting fusion might best be described as true-life-screwball-comic-saga. Is that what America needs? Or is this just a candy-coloured lightshow, a parable to pretty up the fog of war?

We can't help thinking about that closing line about screwing up the endgame. And those numbers the characters throw around, the \$5 million covert aid budget that balloons to an even billion by the movie's end. The point that urgently needs to be made, on screen or in government, is this: Washington's blowback-prone spending of 20 years ago hasn't taught us a thing. Today we're witnessing nothing less than an orgy of mismanagement of American tax dollars in Afghanistan — something we all need to understand as the next 9/11-style outrage draws nearer.

Billions click over like inches on the Bush odometer. The Congressional Budget Office reports that the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have cost more than \$600 billion — Afghanistan about one-fifth of that total, or more than 120 times the amount Charlie Wilson

purportedly secured against the Soviets. That's 120 times more with a poorer result: the Taliban and al-Qaeda aren't thinking about going away after six years, they're coming on strong.

But let's not fade to black, not just yet. This story's still unfolding. The West can still succeed in Afghanistan, if we stop lying to ourselves and get down to the honest business of defeating terrorists.

And oh yes, look out for next summer's blockbuster, "The Son of Charlie Wilson's War: Quest for the Rightful Credits." Coming to a law firm near you...

Arthur Kent has reported regularly from Afghanistan since 1980. Currently he is the Progressive Conservative candidate in his home constituency of Calgary-Currie, Alberta.



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