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## Book Review

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# A portrait of immorality

by Nancy Spannaus

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### **The Commanders**

by Bob Woodward

Simon & Schuster, New York, 1991

398 pages, index, hardbound, \$24.95

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In this highly publicized and controversial book, Bob Woodward once again purports to portray the inside workings of a federal administration, this time around the invasions of Panama and Iraq. Relying on personal interviews and leaks, he seeks to give the reader the idea that "you are there" in the chambers of the decisionmakers in Washington.

Without necessarily believing that Woodward's replication of inner sanctum discussions is 100% accurate, numerous of his portraits ring true. First, it is clear that Bush was totally committed to war with Iraq from the beginning, as Woodward depicts it. Scowcroft and Cheney likewise.

Second, we have the portrayal of the reticence of certain military circles to sign on to these wars of aggression. Woodward gives a graphic portrayal of the process leading toward the firing of Gen. Fred Woerner from the Southern Command, in order to pave the way for the invasion of Panama. He also gives attention to the public relations aspect of preparing this adventure, including the change of the name from Blue Spoon to the (unjustified) Just Cause.

Third comes the detailed rendition of the role which Saudi Ambassador to the Washington Prince Bandar bin Sultan played in ensuring that the Saudi monarchy agreed to Bush's plan for massive troop deployment in the Gulf region. Woodward's account gives a rare glimpse of the Prince's role, which is credible, although still probably underplayed.

The stir caused by *The Commanders* centered heavily on its alleged revelations about the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, and his opposition to the military action in the Gulf. Indeed, the book is shaped as if to portray General Powell as the protagonist, dwelling at length upon his career decisions, his feelings, his list of maxims, and his actions. It is not at all farfetched to believe that Woodward and his masters wanted this book to promote the potential for Powell's future political triumphs.

But *The Commanders* does not show a courageous Powell presenting a case for deferring military action to the President of the United States, or even to Defense Secretary Cheney. To be sure, as Woodward puts it, Powell was left out of a great deal of the discussion which led to both the Panama and Iraqi wars. But when Powell did get a chance to speak his mind, he acted like a career-minded coward, to put it politely.

In fact, given the holocaust now resulting from the U.S. preplanned war against Iraq, Powell's refusal to present an alternative to war is downright obscene.

Woodward describes the crucial meeting twice, a meeting held in early October 1990 at the initiative of Cheney, who took Powell over to the Oval Office to "see what the man thinks about your idea." Powell's idea was containment, or "strangulation," as he called it.

But Powell found that "for some reason the atmosphere wasn't right." He told the President that there were two options, offensive action or containment. Woodward presents it as follows:

" 'This [containment] is an option that has merit,' he said. 'It may take a year, it may take two years, but it will work some day.' He tried to speak as an advocate, adopt the tone of an advocate, support it with his body language. He sat on the edge of his seat, his hands were in the air emphasizing his points, he spoke with conviction. *But he did not go so far as to say to the President that containment was his personal recommendation.*"

" . . . Afterwards, Powell said his conscience was clear. He had presented the military implications of each choice. There was only so much he could do."

### **Career management**

Does Woodward consider this kind of cowardice by Powell to be a recommendation for his virtues?

What Powell is reflecting, as Woodward portrays him at least, is the typical kind of career management behavior, in which the subordinate tells his boss exactly what the latter wants to hear. He looks and listens to find out which way the wind is blowing, and then adapts to that direction. The consequences are disastrous.

This situation is exacerbated in the case of the Bush administration, which is run as a gathering of a bunch of jocks and longtime cronies. Serious discussion about the consequences of a policy is virtually ruled out of order. Although Woodward never makes reference to Bush's hyperthyroid disorder, his portrayal is coherent with the analysis that the President just doesn't have much of an attention span.

At the book's conclusion, Woodward implies that the operation was a success, because so few Americans were killed. What he means is that the careers of the commanders were secure. The morality of their actions never became a really serious issue.

If Woodward is lying, Colin Powell had better speak up and deny it.