

Charlie Wilson's War Study Guide

Charlie Wilson's War by George Crile III

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Plot Summary

George Crile tells the nearly unbelievable tale of Charlie Wilson and his passionate support of the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The book opens near the end of the story, as Charlie Wilson receives an award from the CIA, a rare event for a civilian.

The action then flashes back to Wilson's early days in the Congress. He lives a wild, party life, highlighted by parties in Las Vegas hotels with strippers and hot tubs. As he moves up in the political spectrum, he frequently finds ways to pass the cost of his playboy lifestyle on to the congressional budget. At heart, though, Wilson serves his country as a patriot. The author describes a small boy who listened intently to reports from the front during World War II. He championed the cause of underdogs in his home town of Trinity, Texas.

Wilson, however, is not the only character in this story. Gust Avrakotos, the son of Greek immigrants, enters in chapter three. He grows up firmly ensconced in the middle class in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. However, his strong and varied aptitudes attract the attention of CIA recruiters. He enters the spy agency out of college, drawn by the promise of adventure. However, the agency shows signs of an Ivy League club, and Avrakotos soon realizes, as an outsider, his opportunities appear limited. Yet, he pursues his career.

Lastly, the author introduces Joanne Herring, a wealthy, ultra-conservative from Texas. She politically woos Charlie Wilson, though romance only sparks much later. Herring shares a peculiar friendship with an unpopular president in Pakistan, Zia. Though his religion, Islam, usually limits the actions of women, Zia connects with Herring and appoints her unofficial ambassador for Pakistan. Herring, in turn, introduces Zia's cause to Wilson.

After an invasion by the Soviet Union, in an attempt to spread their communist doctrine, tribesmen from Afghanistan attack. Pakistan offers secret support and refuge for those fleeing their villages. Herring introduces the conflict to Wilson. It speaks to his support of underdogs. Instantly, he authorizes congress to double the CIA's budget for Afghanistan, which draws no interest in America.

Most of the book follows the globe-crossing adventures of Wilson and Avrakotos as they escalate the conflict against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Wilson's specific quest is to give the fighters, the mujahideen, a rocket to shoot down deadly helicopters, called Hind. The journey takes them to Egypt, Israel, France, and, mostly, Pakistan. In each country, they receive royal treatment unlike they see at home. Most of all, they bring together a large portion of the world, mostly small countries, against the Soviet superpower. After six years, the budget grows from some millions of dollars to over one billion dollars per year. With the introduction of the American Stinger rocket, they finally bring down the Hind and, with them, the Soviets. Soon after, the Soviet empire collapses.

However, this story intertwines with America's newest conflict in the same region. The author explains the motivations of these radicals often misunderstood by those in the west. This chapter of the story, the author points out, is not over.



Introduction-Chapter 2

Introduction-Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

This book tells the story of the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the early 1980s. The author confesses that information does not come easily, but what he gathers tells a true story with all the elements of a spy novel.

On June 27 of 1980, Charlie Wilson arrives in Las Vegas with all the fanfare of a very rich man, though he actually makes only a modest salary. Wilson achieves his playboy lifestyle through personal favors owed to him by prominent constituents. In keeping with this, he stays in an elegant suite at the new Caesar's Palace.

The CIA carefully becomes involved when the Soviets attack Afghanistan. They construct aid so that the United States holds no connection with huge stockpiles of weapons, confiscated during previous wars. Many of the weapons are smuggled into Afghanistan through neighboring Pakistan. Worldwide, the Soviets gain negative attention after the mass killing of Afghan fighters. However, the tactics of the Afghan fighters, though unsophisticated, intimidate the Soviet soldiers.

Wilson's call for more support of the conflict in Afghanistan marks the first time a congressman gave money to the CIA. Yet, the generous increase makes no visible impact on the seemingly hopeless conflict. While in Congress, Wilson works hard to keep up his playboy image by surrounding himself, even in his office, with beautiful women. In Washington DC, he keeps a lavish condominium. Yet, he secretly studies military history, a passion that began as a boy, when he listened to radio reports of World War II.

As a young man, Wilson senses the threat posed by the Soviets. Upon completion of high school, Charlie receives an appointment to Annapolis. He graduates from the prestigious school with the most demerits in anyone's memory. While on duty, he operates as a successful officer, but often shows unconventional habits. Most of his time with the navy involves secretly chasing Soviet submarines. Eventually, he receives a job at the Pentagon, rehearsing for nuclear war, a post that Wilson admits gave him a large feeling of power.

At age twenty-seven, Wilson runs for state representative in his home state of Texas, a post illegal for currently serving military. He wins. Soon he turns his eyes to congress, where he runs a liberal ticket in a normally conservative area. Again, he wins. Wilson employs a strategy of honesty, never hiding his scandals from his voting public. Early in his political career, Wilson admits to feelings of guilt for not serving the twenty years commonly expected of an officer. He also feels remorse for voting against the Vietnam War.



Soon after Wilson's appointment, Jack Murphy approaches him about support for Nicaragua against the communists. Against all odds, Wilson secures the money and visits Anastasio Somoza, the Nicaraguan dictator, who honors Wilson for the deal. Wilson shows a rare side of his moral character when he turns down a monetary gift from the dictator.

In another move sparked by his rare breed of morality, Wilson moves one of his staffers to the office of CIA agent Ed Wilson, as Charlie Wilson finds the girl, Tina, attractive, and refuses to date his own staffers. Thus, Ed Wilson describes his work at the CIA to the congressman. Charlie Wilson arranges for a meeting between Somoza and Ed Wilson. Ed, Charlie, and Tina fly to Miami to meet Somoza and his mistress. The cost for support from the CIA proves too much money for Somoza, however, and the deal falls through.

In 1979, enemies shoot Somoza while he is in exile. Investigators catch Jack Murphy taking bribes and Ed Wilson receives an indictment for a deal with US enemy Qaddafi. Tina Simons, former girlfriend of Charlie Wilson and staffer of Ed Wilson, disappears into the witness protection program. Charlie Wilson emerges unscathed, but begins his self-admitted midlife crisis.



Chapters 3-5

Chapters 3-5 Summary and Analysis

The person and place of the book changes abruptly in chapter three. Now the author gives background information on CIA agent Gust Avrakotos. Avrakotos comes from an unlikely background for a CIA agent. Normally, the agency follows a British model for their spies, which exclusively involved those of elite society. One example given is that of Archie Roosevelt, one of the original CIA agents. Avrakotos, a crude spoken fellow, criticizes bluebloods—elites, in general.

Avrakotos hails from Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, the home of a huge steel mill where his father works during his early childhood. Aliquippa itself serves as a fractured home to many different nationalities. The Avrakotos themselves immigrate from Greece, first Avrakotos's father, then his mother. Gust Avrakotos is born in the United States. While growing up in the highly divided and guarded turf of Aliquippa, Avrakotos learns of revenge.

Early in childhood, though, Avrakotos finds a desire to leave his insulated hometown. He spends much time in the library, partially at the instance of his parents, who structure every bit of his time around hard work and hard studies. Gust Avrakotos graduates as the valedictorian of his class and enters college. Soon after, though, his father's soda company goes bankrupt and the young man quits school to help the family, simply a matter of pride for Avrakotos.

A job selling cigarette machines brings Avrakotos in contact with many different cultures of men. He learns how to appeal to them all in order to increase his sales. Once he pays the family debt, Avrakotos returns to college. There, a recruiter from IBM presents a lucrative offer, but Gust Avrakotos confesses to problems with their stuffy dress code and their critique of his old car. A professor refers Avrakotos, instead, to a recruitment office for the CIA. The office offers a salary one third of that at IBM, but promises world travel. Gust Avrakotos has never left Pennsylvania. Avrakotos accepts the job, knowing they recruit him for his street smarts. He enters officer training and attempts to research the agency but finds nothing written. In the early sixties, to write about the American spy is unpatriotic.

In 1962, Avrakotos enters officer training with forty-nine other recruits, thirty-eight of which hail from Ivy League schools. The author describes the world as on the brink of war. The CIA agents see themselves as cancer seekers, hoping to tamp out problems before they escalate to war. Upon graduation, Avrakotos receives his first assignment to his family's home country, Greece.

In 1975, however, the job loses some of its appeal when a rebel shoots a fellow agent in Athens. Shortly after, the names of hundreds of agents appear in the press. The leak damages Avrakotos's own cover, and he stays alive only by using complicated, evasive



measures. Reporters in the United States begin writing about current objectives, with former agents as their sources. Avrakotos takes offense at the leaks, because he views the agency as a fraternity and even a family. Avrakotos even dreams of become director of the CIA, until the Watergate scandal and subsequent purge of the agency by President Carter. The purge includes the firing of first generation Americans in posts all over the world. Avrakotos feels such moves are un-American.

After three years in Boston, Avrakotos secures a job in Helsinki. Just before he leaves for language school, however, the new European chief reverses the appointment and Avrakotos, very colorfully, tells him off. Avrakotos appeals to superior Clair George for deliverance, but the man asks Avrakotos to apologize. Avrakotos once again swears at the European Chief, risking his career.

A third character in the eventual Afghanistan situation is Joanne Herring, the wife of a Texas oil tycoon. The author compares her to Scarlett O'Hara, due in large part to her all-American past. Joanne, an ultra-conservative, minute woman, throws lavish parties in her Texas home. She hosts her own talk show in the 1970s and eventually marries a successful oil tycoon. She then becomes intimate with many of the world's royalty. Eventually, she becomes an honorary consul for Pakistan in Texas. Passionately, she fights for various causes of Pakistan. Herring sees Pakistan as an important front in the war against advancing communism, thanks in part to the education of the French County of Marenches. Her work receives such respect in Pakistan that the highly traditional Islamic country names her an honorary man.

When rebels assassinate Pakistani president Bhutto, the United States officially condemns the new dictator, Zia ul-Haq. The Count warns Herring, though, that seven men stand in the way of communist world powers, one is Zia. After a few visits to Pakistan, Herring and Zia become close. One year after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Joanne Herring begins to lose hope. She calls Charlie Wilson. Wilson also meets Charles Fawcett, a man who tapes a documentary about the tragedies in Afghanistan.

In one surprise move, fellow democrats appoint Wilson to the ethics committee, an unusual appointment for such a rogue congressman. They hope he will protect fellow democrats from bribery allegations. Wilson only accepts on the condition that he also receives a lifetime appointment to the Kennedy Center board, which allows for numerous social engagements he could not afford otherwise. While on the ethics committee, though, Wilson defends John Murtha in a bribery scandal and gains a large IOU.



Chapters 6-8

Chapters 6-8 Summary and Analysis

After telling off the European chief, Avrakotos not only alienates the director but his former friend Clair George. In his interview with the author, Avrakotos states pride in his decision, even if it shows no logic. His Greek heritage, Avrakotos says, makes him feel invincible and chosen. He revisits Aliquippa and asks a sort of Greek witch there to put a curse on director Graver. This gives Avrakotos the confidence to return to CIA headquarters. There, he lies low and, due to the inherent secrecy of the agency, draws pay, unnoticed, for four weeks. After this, he gains a low-level appointment in the Latin America division. He receives tips on how to remain out of the sight of his enemies by befriending low level clerks, especially the African Americans that most of the agents ignore. Avrakotos remains in hiding within the agency for seven months before accepting a job in the Near East division.

Of all the rewards of being a Congressman, Charlie Wilson enjoys the all-expense paid trips the best. In 1982, he visits Lebanon, Israel, and Afghanistan, the last at the behest of Joanne Herring. He takes the honored greeting he receives in Israel very personally and vows to work for the Embassy liaison, Zvi Rafiah.

For Wilson, the trips always mix business and pleasure. For this reason, he resents the fact that he cannot find a suitably beautiful woman in Pakistan. However, in terms of the Afghan/Russian war, after three years, one fifth of Afghanis live as refugees in Pakistan. Many of them volunteer to return as guerilla fighters. President Zia of Pakistan denies to Russian officials that any Afghans are residing in Pakistan, due to pressure from the Soviets for Pakistan to stop supporting the mujahideen. Zia justifies the deception because he sees the war as a jihad, or holy war.

In the beginning, Zia remains suspicious of Americans. He wants no US involvement in Pakistan's affairs with Afghanistan. Likewise, the CIA wants no link between the US and the war in Afghanistan. All weapons filter through Pakistan and are of Soviet origin. In 1982, the budget for the CIA's war in Afghanistan is a mere \$30 million.

Joanne Herring advises her friend, Zia, to befriend Wilson, however, in order to further the cause in Afghanistan. Taking her advice to heart, Zia invites Wilson to dinner and seeks his military advice, in order to flatter the congressman. He then takes Wilson to tour the refugee camps. At the end of the meeting, Zia shares his desire to equip the fighter planes with radar. Wilson sees aid to Zia as earning him an IOU in the future. Before leaving, Wilson promises to help. In Peshawar, Pakistan, Wilson attends a hidden disco, but ruefully notices that no women attend.

In the refugee camps, Wilson notices a virtual lack of men. His guide explains that they all return to fight in the jihad. During a tour of a Red Cross hospital for wounded fighters, Wilson feels the stirrings of support for these underdogs. He donates a pint of blood. In



a discussion with the elders of the Afghani tribesmen, Wilson recognizes that they do not want sympathy, only revenge on the Soviets. Remembering his murdered puppy, Wilson understands revenge. Upon this first visit, Wilson decides that the freedom fighters need a way to shoot down the Russian's Hind helicopter; he takes this on as his passionate cause. Before returning to the States, Wilson goes to CIA headquarters in Pakistan to meet the station chief. Remembering this time, Wilson later says he has three heroes, Churchill, Lincoln, and Zia.

Wilson's meeting with Howard Hart marks Wilson's first meeting with a CIA agent. From Washington, Hart receives the command to brief Wilson of the war in Afghanistan. In his office, Hart makes a production of playing loud music and sweeping the room for bugs before beginning his meeting with Wilson.

Back in his meeting with the congressman, however, Hart seeks only to appease Wilson and to get rid of him. In their own press, the Soviets deny that there is a war in Afghanistan. Wilson leaves the meeting with a feeling that Hart does not mean to defeat the Russians, only annoy them. The CIA appears to have lost many of its recent campaigns. Hart, on the other hand, feels scared and threatened by Wilson. Rarely do congressmen show such interest in a CIA operation. Hart feels in control due to his close relationship with Zia's top general. However, Wilson holds the advantage of being a personal acquaintance of Zia himself, through Joanne Herring. The author uses a bit of foreshadowing by mentioning the Hart knows he will see Wilson again.



Chapters 9-11

Chapters 9-11 Summary and Analysis

Back in the United States, Joanne Herring plans a reception for Zia's first visit to the country. She invites all of her powerful friends from the oil industry and the Fortune 500 list. In deference to Zia's faith, she leaves alcohol off the menu, but Wilson sneaks some in. During the dinner, Herring defends Zia, who many Americans look down upon, especially for his part in the hanging of his predecessor, Bhutto. During the party, Wilson meets with Zia to discuss Pakistan's willingness to receive Russian guns from Israel. Zia agrees, for the sake of the jihad, but maintains that Pakistan and Israel must remain enemies to the public, due to their different and warring religious beliefs.

Wilson asks to meet with someone from the CIA to discuss the war in Afghanistan. The CIA usually avoids congressmen, but feels that, due to Wilson's influence over their budget, they cannot ignore this request. Agent Cogan visits Wilson in his office, but gives no useful information. Just as this meeting takes place, the story of Wilson's party in the Las Vegas hot tub hits the news. An investigation of drug use among several congressmen, Wilson included, begins. The entire spectacle arises only because of another congressman's indiscretions. The Democratic Party responds by revoking Wilson's right to respond to Reagan's state of the Union address. The press quickly dubs the congressman "Cocaine Charlie." Paranoia drives Wilson into a dark, drunken depression. Wilson's lawyer advises him to maintain his routine. He quickly leaves for a tour of Israel and Pakistan, with a belly dancer in tow.

In Israel, Wilson goes against Congressional custom and promises funding for the new weapon. As a thank you, the Israelis draw up plans for a donkey-drawn anti-aircraft weapon for the mujahideen to use against the Russians in Afghanistan. They nickname the weapon the Charlie Horse.

After weapons negotiation, Wilson, Shannon, and several Israelis board a secretive flight for Egypt. Typically, travel between the two countries is restricted, due to shared animosities. In fact, Israel blocks all flights to Muslim nations. However, Wilson holds a friendship with Egyptian Defense Minister Ghazala. Due to a deal that awarded Egypt with \$1 billion in aid, Wilson and his friends receive a regal greeting in Egypt.

In Pakistan, Wilson once again hides Shannon's identity. In fact, she feels the secrecy of the trip so keenly that she never develops the pictures she takes there. They once again visit the camps of refugees and injured fighters. Wilson feels his fighting spirit revive after a visit to the hospital, where he once again donates blood. However, meetings with Howard Hart still lead nowhere, with the CIA chief very distrusting of Wilson's larger plans. Hart fears losing the CIA's cover. Years later, the author reports, Hart fails to believe the true involvement of Israel.



With Zia's permission, Shannon and Wilson visit the border area of the tribal lands between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Wilson meets with tribal leaders. He sees even Pakistani men enter the war, dressed as mujahideen. Feeling unsure about Wilson's ability to carry through on his elaborate promises, Zia calls Herring, who promises that Charlie will come through. After explaining that they need only to woo Doc Long of the appropriations committee, Wilson flies west with Shannon and gifts from Zia.

In chapter eleven, the author returns to the story of Gust Avrakotos, who desires a promotion within the CIA. The agency employs an unknown number of agents, though it is over twenty thousand. However, only a few, specially trained and decorated employees hold qualifications for the top offices. Avrakotos acknowledges that, because he refuses to play by the rules of his Ivy League colleagues, he stands little chance of receiving a substantial promotion.

However, before another gets Avrakotos's desired promotion, Avrakotos gains temporary authority over the war in Afghanistan. Though he fails to gain friendship from Howard Hart, Hart admits that Avrakotos did amazing things to extend their budget by haggling in the black market. In this way, he differs from Charlie Wilson, who flaunts generosity even when he cannot afford to. Avrakotos explains that, just as when he sold cigarettes in Pennsylvania, he finds the dealers' secret desires, which often prove stronger than the price. For instance, a Polish general wanted a tombstone for his grandfather in Canada. Avrakotos made the arrangements and the General sold the goods at a much lower price.



Chapters 12-14

Chapters 12-14 Summary and Analysis

After returning from Pakistan, Wilson meets with Pierson, his lawyer on the drug charges. In a depression, Wilson falls into a nearly constant, drunken stupor. Only the war in Afghanistan makes Wilson feel worthwhile. He tells the press of the "toy bombs" dropped by the Soviets that maim Afghani children. He also begins to woo Doc Long, the head of the appropriations committee, in charge of funding the CIA's war in Afghanistan. Doc Long, an eccentric, old congressman, brags that money equals power and has a sign to this effect in his office.

Outside of the congress, the limo driver from Las Vegas, the son of a friend of Wilson's, denies the drug use. The only witness to drug use, Liz Wickersham, only saw questionable behavior outside of the country, so all charges against Wilson drop. Wilson celebrates and takes Joanne Herring to an arms show in Paris, where they both admit to falling in love. Herring introduces Wilson to members of European royalty. They begin to talk of marriage. In addition, they plan a junket to Pakistan for Doc Long, who loves such trips. Joanne Herring plans to attend as an aid to Zia.

Chapter thirteen opens the night before Wilson is to depart on the junket with Doc Long. While driving drunk, he hits another car, causing significant damage to the both vehicles. He flees the scene. He calls his assistant, Charles Simpson, to clean up the mess before his return. Simpson complies, but shares that the incident disillusioned him as to Wilson's character and makes him feel dirty. Wilson also feels remorse for the deception, but feels he has no other choice.

In Pakistan, Zia gives Doc Long a regal greeting. The group tours the refugee camps and soldier's hospitals. Doc Long addresses the soldiers and their passion moves him. He feels drawn to the power. On the return leg of the junket, Herring and Wilson stop off in Venice. They feel victorious in their campaign to win the eccentric Doc Long to their cause.

When looking back at the war in 1992, Avrakotos tells the author that he knows the CIA did the right job in Afghanistan because reporters gave no credit to the agency, thus proving they kept it secret enough. However, while in England, he learns several important facts about the tribes fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. While usually the tribes of Pastun and Massoud fight one another, they more or less agree to fight the Soviets together. Yet, when one tribe seems to get preferential treatment, the other retaliates by refusing to fight.



Chapters 15-17

Chapters 15-17 Summary and Analysis

With Long completely on board for Wilson's campaign ideas in Afghanistan, Wilson begins pushing through funding that the CIA never requested, a move never before attempted by Congress. The CIA visits Wilson in response to the unrequested funds. Gust Avrakotos meets Wilson for the first time and suspects a kindred spirit.

In chapter sixteen, after Wilson wins the congress over for the \$40 million, the CIA reacts with no enthusiasm. The agents resent that he designates a substantial chunk for anti-aircraft artillery, and that they must account for all of it to Wilson. Howard Hart feels especially threatened, as the director in Pakistan. He feels that concealing US involvement must remain a top priority. Hart fears that anything more could anger the Russians to an escalation in both Afghanistan and elsewhere, endangering American troops. Moreover, he feels that bleeding the Russians represents victory for America, even if Afghanistan never wins.

In 1984, Charlie Wilson travels to Pakistan. Seven tribal leaders from Afghanistan come to meet Wilson, among them, Gulbuddin, who will later voice support for Saddam Hussein during the first gulf war. At this time, however, the tribal leaders agree to accept weapons from Israel, as long as they remain anonymous. Wilson avoids the CIA during the first leg of the trip. Before returning to America, Wilson stops to visit Hart. They argue about guns and money for the war.

The CIA headquarters also continues to balk at Congress forcing money on them. Cogan returns to Wilson's office, with Gust Avrakotos in tow. Secretly, Avrakotos agree with Wilson's rationale for the money, but feels that, publicly, he must support his superior. The author points out that Wilson's term is ending. Cogan drags his feet, hoping the controversial Congressman will not be reelected.



Chapter 18-20

Chapter 18-20 Summary and Analysis

Avrakotos receives a permanent appointment to Afghanistan and the Near East division. Soviets begin escalating attacks in Afghanistan. Wilson continues to push the CIA for a bigger war effort. Finally, Avrakotos visits Wilson's office alone, something never done by CIA agents; they always take a congressional liaison. Avrakotos, however, spots a kindred spirit in Wilson. He asks the Congressman for even more money.

Charlie Wilson and Gust Avrakotos quickly work out a way to play the system in both Congress and the CIA. Director Casey asks Wilson for support for the Contras in Nicaragua. However, Wilson admits to the author that he already had given up his support of the Contras in favor of Afghanistan. In fact, Wilson enjoys the fact that the controversy in Nicaragua draws unwanted attention from Afghanistan.

At his new post in the Near East Division, Avrakotos begins striking hard deals on the black market, which he crudely compares to risky sex abroad. However, deals with China quality drop the price on ammunition worldwide, because they keep their prices so low. In addition, a report of one Afghan fighter shooting down three Russian helicopters serves to boost moral. Weekly, Avrakotos and Wilson meet in secret in Wilson's office.

Not only does the war in Afghanistan fall under Avrakotos's department, but also the conflict between Iran and Iraq. The agency, however, only wants to keep the playing field level, to distract the two countries as long as possible and drain their resources. In staffing his team for this volatile part of the earth, Avrakotos insists on keeping his team small, never more than fourteen. He also chooses people seemingly from the bottom of the heap, just as Avrakotos feels he was upon first joining the Agency.



Chapters 21-23

Chapters 21-23 Summary and Analysis

Avrakotos hires Mike Vickers from the paramilitary branch to assist him in weapons and tactics. Vickers, who served as a Green Beret before entering the CIA, offers a complete overhaul of the campaign in Afghanistan. His plan, however, requires a \$1.2 billion budget. Vickers fears he holds too low of a rank to suggest such radical changes. However, Avrakotos receives the ideas with excitement and even his superiors sign off on the ideas, though they doubt that congress will allow for the budget increase.

Avrakotos takes Vickers directly to Wilson, where Vickers once again explains the need and impact of a variety of new weapons to unsettle the enemy. Wilson shows interest in the plan, but still insists on the need for a weapon to shoot down the Hind helicopters. He invites Avrakotos to Egypt to evaluate a possible weapons deal there. Gust agrees, but worries that Wilson may stand to gain personally from such a deal.

Nineteen eighty-four brings much change to Wilson's life. He wins reelection. In addition, Joanne Herring becomes engaged, and her fiancé shows distaste for Wilson, causing her to pull away from the flashy congressman.

That year, Wilson travels with Trisha Wilson and Gust Avrakotos to Egypt for a potential arms deal. In usual form, Wilson travels first class and Avrakotos travels coach. Everyone in the CIA believes that Wilson stands to gain from the arms deal in Egypt. Avrakotos remains on alert for any clue that this is true. In demonstrations of the larger weapons, the machinery proves to be subpar and Avrakotos refuses to buy any of it. When this fails to faze Wilson, Avrakotos decides the congressman does not have monetary interest in the deal.

The Egyptian contact, Ghazala, however, gives them valuable factory tours, where Avrakotos gains important intelligence information about which countries support Egypt and the conflict in the near east. They also discover a cache of a type of rocket that the agency has wanted for years. Likewise, Wilson learns a lot in Egypt; specifically, that the war effort may not need to find one magic bullet, as he previously believed. In fact, they need the special mix that Vickers is proposing.

Back in the states, congressmen begin to attack the CIA and their campaign in Afghanistan. Certain lobbyists begin to accuse the CIA of holding back the support that the Afghans need. To protect their secrecy, however, the CIA cannot react; after all, officially they are not involved in the war in Afghanistan. Avrakotos admits that he long wished for more support in congress for Afghanistan, but such attacks prove a costly use of his limited resources. Wilson sets out in Congress to handle the resulting bad press.



Chapters 24-26

Chapters 24-26 Summary and Analysis

The enormous budget for Afghanistan gains Avrakotos much power and respect in the CIA, which he previously lacks because of his lack of blue blood upbringing. He feels this fact while traveling personally with Director Casey to Saudi Arabia, where the Arabs maintain their promise to match the Congress dollar for dollar in Afghanistan. With their matching donation, Avrakotos's budget exceeds half a billion dollars.

For many reason, 1985 becomes key in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Early in 1985, Russian leader Gorbachev accuses Pakistan's President Zia of support for Afghanistan, which Zia confidently denies, citing that Islam allows lying, especially to advance a jihad. Nevertheless, famed Soviet General Varennikov begins skilled attacks in the region, and it looks like the Soviets may be winning.

Encouragingly, Vickers point out to Avrakotos that the introduction of Soviet Special forces shows desperation. In response, and under his new plan, Vickers cuts back the freedom fighters to 150,000 of the best, and offers them more training. Pakistani General Yasouf moves to block the plan because he holds a grudge against US officials for a perceived offense on a previous trip to America. However, a tip from inside Pakistan moves Avrakotos to give a small ammunition contract to a factory in Pakistan. Yasouf then steps aside.

With the exit of Simpson, Charlie Wilson hires a new assistant, Charles Schnabel. Schnabel quickly adopts the Afghan cause and acts as a "second Charlie," signing Wilson's name to deals and correspondence, with the congressman's blessing. Frequently, the two Charlies play good cop, bad cop for the war effort. Schnabel is not above smuggling contraband items, such as sniper sights, into Afghanistan, funded by his hunting buddies in Texas. Over time, Schnabel becomes even more passionate about the cause, even converting to Islam.

With President Reagan's reelection, the political scene in Washington turns to foreign aid projects. The trouble with refugee camps at the Pakistan/Afghanistan border receives attention. Wilson wants to train some of the freedom fighters as medics, but the CIA worries that such an obvious US involvement will anger the Soviets. However, operating outside of the CIA, the assistance program, AID, sets up along the border.

The director of AID, Larry Crandall, uses a large chunk of his budget to buy the local's support, by giving out large SUVs, presumably to carry supplies. Many of the vehicles instantly disappear into Afghanistan, but Crandall gains the support he desired. AID serves to keep Afghans in their own villages, with supplies and medical support, thus ending the Soviet's Scorched Earth campaign to esolate the Afghan countryside. Secretly, AID also helps with the war effort, seeing no problem with putting some ammo



into a shipment of food supplies to save a trip. Likewise, Schnabel often travels on the AID planes, carrying in his contraband items.

What's more, Crandall talks frequently with the mujahideen about their war efforts and their needs inside the country. He passes any useful information on to the CIA. The presence of AID makes hiding US involvement unnecessary and America's efforts begin to look very serious to the Russians.

As is his pattern, Wilson begins behaving badly just after a professional victory. At a party, he spots a new love interest, who he calls Sweetums. To impress his new, and much younger, girlfriend, Wilson arranges for a party aboard a naval ship, which hits the papers in a scandal. Wilson apologizes and offers payment to Sweetums' family, but the trip sets precedence for all of Sweetums' travels with Charlie Wilson.

Experts claim that, by 1985, Wilson accumulates as much as one million dollars in personal debts. Yet, he arranges to take Sweetums on an exotic trip, visiting just enough dignitaries to put the cost on the American government. However, while in Paris, Wilson collapses and doctors diagnose an "alcoholic's heart." Despite his dire condition, Wilson flies home from the American hospital in Germany to cast a vote for the contra effort.

Wilson enters a hospital in Virginia, where he learns his heart only operates at sixteen percent. He seeks second opinions until a doctor from Texas gives him more than a few months to live, if he cleans up his act. Wilson worries that a life without partying will scare away his friend. Avrakotos worries that, if Wilson dies, so will the support for the war in Afghanistan. In addition, Avrakotos fears losing a friend. Without his social life, Wilson becomes more passionate about his cause.



Chapters 27-29

Chapters 27-29 Summary and Analysis

In a bit of foreshadowing, the author says that Wilson stays sober for eighteen months. In that time, he begins pursuing new weapons for Afghanistan. He wants the tinkerers at the Pentagon to develop new weapons for the program. Many prove to be successful, but one overzealous inventor blows up a gas station outside of DC in a freak accident while transporting his latest idea. The weapons inventors show Wilson appreciation for his support by naming their facilities, little more than a garage, after him.

At this time, a congressional aide to McCollum, Vaughn Forest, approaches Wilson with ideas for the war. One that proves beneficial is that of humanitarian flights. He points out the air force pilots spend countless hours in the air in empty planes, maintain their certifications. He proposes that, instead, they fly supplies to Pakistan, with Zia's approval. Schnabel often uses these flights to take his contraband to the region. The flights also transport wounded mujahideen to the United States for treatment. However, the rival tribes within the same hospital often cause problems. One particularly abrasive man is returned home for his behavior; there, he is promptly hung.

Chapter twenty-eight introduces the American Missile, Stinger, made by General Dynamics in California. Without it, the Hinds remain untouchable, but the Stinger makes hiding US involvement impossible. Avrakotos begins to feel impatient, but Vickers reminds him to view the larger picture. He sees this as a mirror of Vietnam as they feed support to the guerrillas that relentlessly attack the Soviets. The mujahideen manage to operate a success ambush without foreign aid, which gives Avrakotos hope.

Yet, as the war in Afghanistan gains legitimacy, Cannistraro and other conservatives continue to badmouth the efforts in the press. They attack McMahan in the CIA as being at fault. The CIA remains mute, to protect its own secrets. Finally, near the end of 1985, all objections against the Stinger cease. Many claim credit for this development, but the author gives it all to Charlie Wilson and his initial push for the Oerlikon.

In the beginning of 1986, Milt Bearden takes over in Afghanistan. Many of the major news outlets say that Freedom fighters are losing in Afghanistan and coverage drops off. Vickers leaves Avrakotos and the CIA, feeling certain that his career can never grow more exciting than it already has been. Avrakotos's position becomes precarious, because of some bad history between himself and the man who takes over as his superior.

However, on September 26, 1986, Afghan freedom fighters, armed with American made Stingers, shoot down the first Hind helicopters. Soon, they shoot down an average of one a day, making the rocket launchers a valuable investment.



Chapters 30-32

Chapters 30-32 Summary and Analysis

By September of 1986, Gust Avrakotos, at the behest of his new boss, also his old enemy, works for the African division. The deciding event stems from Avrakotos verbal lack of support for the Iran-Contra incident. He goes on record against the agency's actions, and, later, proves to be right. Even though he feels banished from his rightful place, he acknowledges that he acted nobly, and made decisions he can live with. Avrakotos takes the move uncharacteristically quietly, as his bride-to-be and son now work for the agency; he fears retribution could extend to them.

The greatest injustices, though, are that, unlike Howard Hart, Avrakotos leaves the division without an official award. At his obligatory going away party, he only gets an honor from the agency's African-American employees. He is, however, the first white man to receive it. In addition, Avrakotos's superior forbids him from speaking to Charlie Wilson. Though Gust Avrakotos only lives a few miles from headquarters in Langley, Virginia, he cuts off communication with Wilson, who believes him to be stationed in Africa. Even his few items of departing correspondence appear to have African origins.

Wilson, however, continues to champion the cause. As with all his trips abroad with Sweetums, though, a trip to Pakistan proves embarrassing when a particularly strict pilot refuses to allow her, a civilian, on the DEA plane. Wilson calls in multiple favors, including Zia himself, and gains a flight to a dinner in his honor. He promises revenge on the young officer, though others warn him that the issue really is quite foolish.

Soon after he arrives home, a scandal breaks in which sources claim dirty money from the Iran Contra Scandal actually came out of a band account for the war in Afghanistan. Wilson quickly calls a press conference and assures everyone that there was simply an accounting error. The CIA expresses deep gratitude for his quick aid in this matter. During Christmas of 1986, Wilson rewards eighteen months of good behavior with one night of drinking. He considers slipping back into his old ways, because he needs more adventure. Instead, he takes a call from Zia, who informs Wilson that plans for his trip in Afghanistan has been made.

In Pakistan, Wilson remarks on the dangers in just traveling to the war front. Bandits cover the countryside on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border. Though heavily protected under Zia's orders, Wilson sees actual combat. At one point, he assures the mujahideen that they need not lure a Hind closer to bring it down, at their own peril. After returning to safety, CIA Agent Bearden presents Wilson with the shell of the first stinger fired in Afghanistan. Feeling the let down from such an exhilarating experience, Wilson takes up drinking again.

One scandal that always lurks for Pakistan is that of their nuclear bomb developments. As the war nears victory, Wilson calls in all his debts in Congress to convince the

lawmakers to continue to ignore this program. Zia also hires the best congressional lobbyists for this task. Wilson wins the vote in a rare all night battle in congress. At the end of 1987, the Soviets move to withdraw from Afghanistan.



Chapters 33-Epilogue

Chapters 33-Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The author, in chapter thirty-three, gives a detailed look at the morale of Soviets during this time. Unlike veterans of World War II, Afghan war veterans receive no honors. The government instructs mothers to leave off mentioning service on the gravestones of their dead sons. Moreover, the government assures the populace that the foreign press prints lies about the war. However, as the soldiers begin returning home, many injured, the story begins to leak into the public.

In Geneva, the two sides of the Afghan war reach a truce. It prohibits any more weapons from either the Soviets or the Americans. The CIA rushes to get weapons in place before the truce goes into effect. On April 14 of 1988, the leaders sign a write of withdraw. Charlie Wilson takes a team from 60 Minutes to Afghanistan. There, they witness a rather scripted tour of the country, though it seems impromptu. Wilson gets an official Pakistani military uniform. He says he is glad that he played a part in revenge for Vietnam. Without a war to fight, Wilson quickly returns to drinking.

In the summer of 1988, President Zia dies in a plane crash. This crushes something in Wilson's spirit. He turns any of his remaining dealings with Pakistan over to Schnabel. In Afghanistan, the warring tribes once again begin fighting one another. When the last of the Russians leave Afghanistan in February of 1989, Avrakotos watches it on television in Rome, where he is retired. One colleague from the agency calls to congratulate him. He realizes how much he still misses Wilson.

Finally, the Epilogue of the account fast-forwards to September of 2001, an infamous day in the United States.

For his part, the author tells how he learns of the story in 1989, from Gust Avrakotos. Concerning the end of the war, Wilson feels a need to honor and thank the mujahideen. He keeps money for aid flowing there, though some of the US's former allies in the region back Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf War. Also, Wilson plans his wedding to Sweetums in Afghanistan, but, before this happens, she catches him in an affair.

The CIA begins to worry that putting the deadly mujahideen in charge will not be in any country's best interest. When they take over Kabul, the city quickly is laid in ruins. Though Afghanistan triggered the fall of the Soviets, it also ushered many other radicals into the region. Among them was Osama bin Ladin. In fact, the victory, which the Afghans only attribute to Allah and not the US, emboldens them to continue their jihad.

Many radical Muslims feel that, now that they took down one superpower, they can take on more. They also feel that the US betrayed Pakistan over their nuclear bomb plans. Moreover, the occupation of Saudi Arabian land by American, female soliders offends

them. Ultimately, they fear that America desires to control the world's oil supply. The author closes by stating that such an account only gives the beginning; much in this war lies ahead.



Characters

Charlie Wilson

As a boy, Charlie Wilson listened to radio reports in Trinity, Texas, of Churchill in World War II. He feels the excitement and honor in military service. This draws him to serve his country, which he does, in the navy, for several years. Soon, however, he makes a move into politics, which serves better to support his playboy lifestyle. He takes trips to exotic places, often with a beautiful woman in tow. Amazingly, he often passes the bill on to the government. This lifestyle proves detrimental to Wilson on several occasions. First, he faces federal drug charges for an incident in a hot tub in Las Vegas. Also, he sees scandal for his indiscriminate spending, meant to impress his newest lady. Finally, his heavy drinking brings him down physically, with a very weak heart. However, in the course of this story, he dodges all of these problems.

Soon after Wilson receives a place on the Appropriations committee, he draws the attention of fellow Texan, Joanne Herring. Herring pleads with Wilson to help her pet cause, the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Drawn to this underdog conflict, Wilson begins intervening on behalf of the mujahideen in Afghanistan. He doubles the budget over and over. Quickly, the cause becomes his own, and he continues it even after Joanne remarries and steps off the scene. In fact, when his health forces a break from his drinking lifestyle, he pours all his extra energy into the cause. After years, he sees victory in this war-torn region.

For his part, the mujahideen honors Wilson with the shell of the first successful Stinger rocket. Pakistan gives him an honorary military uniform, and the CIA offers their highest civilian honor. In the end, Wilson states, no matter the consequences, the war was necessary to halt communism, but the end was badly handled, despite his best efforts to continue aid.

Gust Avrakotos

Gust Avrakotos grows up in a steel mill town in western Pennsylvania. His parents came to America from Greece, and Avrakotos has a very ethnic upbringing, which teaches him many things that later prove invaluable. Avrakotos excels in school, but suffers a setback in college, when he must return home to support his family. After he returns to college, he catches the attention of the CIA.

Life in the CIA proves as adventurous as Avrakotos dreams, but many upper level jobs seem out of reach for the son of immigrants. Many top jobs go to sons of Roosevelts and the like. Avrakotos, however, pursues advancement. Several times his background, combined with his harsh personality, nearly brings him down. Yet, he stays to take, nearly by force, the office of the Near East Division.



There, he assembles his team, the "Dirty Dozen." He works in secret with Congressman Wilson to escalate the war effort and bring victory to Afghanistan. Yet, further conflicts within the agency cause Avrakotos's reassignment to Africa just before victory. He leaves with no awards or accolades.

Joanne Herring

Herring, a debutante from Texas, learns of the plight of the mujahideen in Afghanistan from the Count of Marenches, a personal friend. A wealthy, ultra-conservative from Texas, Herring needs a cause to champion. She even befriends Pakistani President Zia and defends his controversial rule to many powerful Americans.

Herring gets most of her work done through elaborate dinner parties. In this way, he courts Wilson, among others. She builds up his character when it needs it most and pushes this powerful man in the direction of her cause. Over time, romance develops between the two, but never lasts.

When Herring remarries in the mid 1980s, her husband shows distaste for Charlie's scandalous lifestyle. She cuts off her contact with him

Liz Wickersham

The daughter of one of Wilson's political supporters, she serves as a runner up for Miss America and poses for Playboy. Wilson introduces her to Hollywood persons, in hopes of gaining her a job on a new soap opera.

Charles Simpson

Simpson, Wilson's administrative assistant, admits Wilson's one downfall is his drinking. When Wilson gets out of a costly hit and run accident with no repercussions, Simpson becomes forever disillusioned about his boss's morals. He remains at work only out of a sense of duty.

Frank Anderson

Anderson, the chief of the Near East division of the CIA, also honors Wilson's work.

President Muhammad Zia ul-Haq

This leader of Pakistan dislikes the United States. He helps Afghanistan fight the Soviets. In addition, Zia helps the CIA, though he forbids direct US involvement and blocks any Americans from entering Afghanistan, to avoid retributions from the Soviets. Eventually, however, the United States escalates their involvement, pointing out their



intentional oversights of Zia's nuclear program when he protests. In the end, he cannot afford to do anything that would cause his country to lose the millions in annual aid.

Zia is a close friend of Joanne Herring. He appoints her honorary ambassador to Texas, though Islamic law, which governs his country, usually prohibits such offices for women.

Wilmuth Wilson

Charlie Wilson's mother lives as a liberal in a conservative town in the Bible Belt of Texas. She supports Planned Parenthood and the rights of African Americans.

Zvi Rafiah

Rafiah serves in the Israeli Embassy and becomes their congressional liaison. He befriends Wilson after learning of Wilson's support for Israel.

Jack Murphy

Murphy brings up the plight of Nicaragua to Wilson. Wilson desires to provide aid to the Nicaraguans to stop the advance of Communism.

Anastasio Somoza

The Nicaraguan dictator honors Wilson for his attempt to aid the country's fight against the communists. He even offers Wilson a \$50,000 monetary gift, but Wilson denies, lest it look like a bribe. In the end, however, the \$100 million cost of the help of the DIA proves too much for Somoza. While in exile in Paraguay, enemies of the dictator assassinate his family.

Ed Wilson

Charlie Wilson describes Ed Wilson as a rogue CIA agent. Charlie Wilson enlists the help of the agent in getting aid to Nicaragua. Ed Wilson also employs a former aid of Charlie Wilson. Charlie Wilson relocates Tina Simons so that he can date her.

Tina Simons

Charlie Wilson holds few ethical standards, but one is to never date an employee. Therefore, he moves Tina Simons to the office of friend Ed Wilson, an agent with the CIA. When investigators accuse Ed Wilson of making a deal with Qaddafi, Tina Simons enters the witness protection program.



Philip Agee

When this former CIA agent publishes the names of hundreds of current agents, Avrakotos plans to ruin the man. His superiors command him to leave the former agent alone, even though many of the agents named die at the hands of enemies of the agency.

John Terjelian

Fellow agent Terjelian first introduces Gust Avrakotos to the plight of Afghanistan.

Count of Marenches

The Count introduces Joanne Herring to Pakistan. Even when the United States condemns the new dictator, The Count points to him as a key defense against communism.

Charles Fawcett

Fawcett travels to Afghanistan and tapes a documentary to get the plight of the country to the American people. Fawcett screens his film, in its rough form, at one of Joanne Herring's elite parties.

John Murtha

After Wilson receives an appointment to the ethics committee, he saves Murtha from a bribery scandal.

John McGaffin

As the chief of the Near East division of the CIA, McGaffin invites Avrakotos to join him upon learning that Avrakotos lacks an official appointment.

Yaqub Khan

Khan is the Pakistani ambassador to the United States and a former military general. In 1971, he seeks Wilson to raise support in congress for Pakistan's fight against the Soviets.



Howard Hart

Howard Hart serves as the CIA's director in Afghanistan. Charlie Wilson visits his wartime office in Pakistan several times. Wilson frightens Hart, because the agent wants to keep the CIA's involvement low, while Wilson wants to escalate. Hart's war plan is simply to bleed the Soviet government a little at a time. Any conflict that does not lose American lives serves as a victory to Hart.

As is the agency's custom, Hart gets a new assignment after a few years. For his work in Afghanistan, he receives many honors. He never looks back.

Chuck Cogan

Cogan serves as Near East Division Chief in the CIA before Avrakotos. He shares Howard Hart's vision for the war in Afghanistan. On several occasions, he visits Charlie Wilson's office and attempts to derail the congressman's interest in the war. This plan abjectly fails.

Carol Shannon

A girlfriend of Wilson's, Shannon works as a belly dancer in Texas. He takes her to Egypt, where she dances for Wilson's friends in the military. This performance gains Wilson much good will from the officials.

Mohammed Abu Ghazala

Ghazala, the Defense minister in Egypt, befriends Wilson even before Wilson's involvement in Afghanistan. He offers support and weapons for the war effort. Carol Shannon draws his interest, as belly dancing is forbidden under Egypt's strict, Muslim law.

Doc Long

Long chairs the appropriations committee that Wilson sits on. Herring and Wilson realize that, to escalate the war as they desire, they need Long's support. They take him on an exciting tour of the area, where the passions of the mujahideen inspire Long to come on board.

Art Alper

Alper works behind the scenes in the CIA, until Avrakotos discovers him. Alper comes onto Avrakotos's team in the Near East Division as a weapons expert. He invents some devious devices to further the war effort.



Larry Penn

Penn serves Avrakotos in the legal department. Most often, he finds ways around the complicated and slow bureaucracy of the CIA.

Mike Vickers

Vickers holds an impressive resume, including stellar service in the Green Berets. He joins the CIA's paramilitary unit, as has always been his goal. Avrakotos discovers Vickers through tips from his friends in the secretarial pool. Vickers overhauls the Afghan campaign, offering a new mix of weapons and tactics that soon turn the war effort around. Before victory comes to Afghanistan, however, Vickers moves out of the CIA when he realizes that, given his low grade, it will be years before he has such an exciting opportunity again.

Charlie Schnabel

Schnabel replaces Simpson as Wilson's assistant. The new Charlie quickly takes to the Afghan's cause. He often works in Wilson's place and even signs the congressman's name, with Wilson's blessing. The CIA cannot offer sniper scopes to the mujahideen, as a matter of policy, so Schnabel buys some through personal friends and smuggles them to the freedom fighters.



Objects/Places

Washington DC

Charlie Wilson cultivates his playboy lifestyle in the nation's capital, living with more celebrity than most members of congress. Washington DC also houses the CIA headquarters at Langley. The author describes the compound as one shrouded in mystery. Even Avrakotos, one of the agency's own, hides within the agency for seven months, unnoticed.

Langley

The introduction offers the most detailed account of the CIA headquarters. Even while on the campus, one sees few agents. The agents abide by strict rules of don't ask and don't tell.

Las Vegas

Nowhere is Wilson's lifestyle more at home than in Las Vegas. He attends a lavish party in the new Cesar's Palace. Even in revealing interviews with the author, Wilson refuses to admit what all occurred within the Fantasy Suite.

Afghanistan

Many outsiders see the mujahideen fighters of Afghanistan as crude and untrained. Those who fought against them, however, cite frightening instances of torture that affect fear to the most trained of the Soviet soldiers. After the invasion of the Soviets, however, many Afghans seek refuge in Pakistan, a fact that the officials of Pakistan deny.

USSR

In the time of the cold war, America sees USSR as her ultimate enemy. CIA agents view themselves as the only soldiers in the worldwide war against the spread of communism.

Trinity, Texas

Charlie Wilson grows up in the conservative town of Trinity in the Bible Belt of Texas. His liberal mother, however, encourages him to always fight for the underdog. He gains congressional seat from this typically conservative area, even on a liberal ticket. Once in congress, he funnels available jobs and money back to his hometown.



Nicaragua

Wilson's first attack against the spread of communism arises in Nicaragua. He arranges for a meeting between Somoza, the dictator of Nicaragua, and the CIA. However, Somoza turns down the deal based on monetary cost. Communists eventually run Somoza from the country and assassinate him while in exile in Paraguay.

Aliquippa, Pennsylvania

The steel town of Aliquippa is the birthplace of first generation American Gust Avrakotos, son of Greek immigrants. Exposure to the outside world instills in Avrakotos a desire to see the world. After college, he accepts a job with the CIA and leaves Pennsylvania for the first time.

Pakistan

Pakistan serves as the way into and out of Afghanistan during the war against the Soviets. Refugees flee the country and take up residence in the border towns of Pakistan by the thousands. The CIA filters weapons to the Afghan fighters through Pakistan, even though the United States formerly renounces the dictator, Zia.

Peshawar

The Afghans set up refugee camps in the Peshawar province of Pakistan, a largely lawless area of the country.

Lincoln Continental

Wilson's car represents many of his scandals. He receives it from Wickersham, the father of the woman involved in the cocaine scandal. Then, on his way home to another woman while involved with Joanne Herring, he flees a hit and run in the Lincoln.

Hind

The Russian helicopter represents the Soviet Union and, to an extent, communism. It flies higher than the mujahideen's gun can fire and wipes out whole villages with its machine guns. However, Hinds are expensive to make and maintain. When the Stinger rockets finally bring down these gunships, each hit represents several million dollars lost by the Soviet government.



Oerlikons

Wilson first pushes the Swiss rocket, Oerlikon, on the CIA. He even mandates it in their budget for some time. However, the CIA, not sure they want this level of involvement, resists.

Stinger

The CIA passes over this rocket again and again because it would be a red flag to the Soviets of the level of US involvement. Eventually, though, the war effort takes a turn and the passion of the CIA becomes victory. This rocket brings down the killer Hind gunships which, in turn, makes the war a huge financial burden on the Soviets.

Themes

Patriotism

Both Wilson and Avrakotos operate out of a sense of duty towards their country. Such feelings often occur in men and women of their generation. Wilson begins by serving in the military, but his recreational outlook on life fails to mesh with the regimented military lifestyle. Avrakotos receives his patriotism from his immigrant father, who values the opportunities afforded to his family in America.

For his part, men like Howard Hart see effort in Afghanistan as patriotic, because by distracting America's enemy, the Soviet Union, he saves the lives of American soldiers elsewhere. Avrakotos and Wilson, however, feel that in the wake of defeat in Vietnam, America needs a victory, pure and simple. Wilson plays on the patriotism of his fellow congressman often, calling for their support of his budgets in order to defeat the CIA.

This story shows that patriotism comes in many forms. Each of the key players work to the good of their country, even though they sometimes work at odds with one another. Likewise, patriotism for one's country appears in many of the countries the author describes. The Israelis, Egyptians, and Afghans all show love for their country. Zia willingly puts aside an age-old rivalry with Israel in order to fight the more imminent threat of communism at his back door. He also compromises on several fronts with America. He does this for the good of his country. In contrast, the dishonest practices of the Soviet Union leads to a remarkable lack of patriotism there.

Fatalism

Avrakotos and Wilson recognize the fatalism of the Islamic fighters. They believe that Allah prescribes the death of all men. Therefore, they feel somewhat invincible in battle, because if their time to die comes, it does not matter where they are. On the other hand, if Allah wishes they live, no bullet can kill them. This also extinguishes any guilt for killing another, because for this to happen means it was the will of Allah.

In the beginning, under Howard Hart's direction, the CIA seems to exploit this seeming willingness to die. Some activists in America point out the fact that America sends the mujahideen into battle poorly equipped. By the time this argument reaches the press, it is no longer true, which causes no end of headaches for Avrakotos. However, it does not arise without some basis of truth.

From the beginning, Wilson feels this exploitation of the mujahideen to be morally wrong. One may be surprised to read about morality in connection with a playboy such as Wilson. However, for all his destructive personal behavior, Charlie Wilson shines as a man with strict principles. He fights for the rights of these people whom he does not know, the Afghans, even before and after their cause is popular.



To some extent, the men in this story adopt this belief in fatalism. Wilson sees it as honorable, planning parades and memorials for the thousands of fallen mujahideen. Avrakotos takes his transfer to Africa in a new way. He shows that the work, not the man is important.

World Community

Prior to the cold war and the information era of the 1980s and 1990s, countries operated with autonomy. Few questioned that a ruler, be he a president or a dictator, ran his people as he saw fit. However, the spread of communism shows the first signs of a change in this philosophy. Alongside this, free nations ran to spread democracy in places before communism took over. They also fought to protect democracies already in place.

This story shows a concerted effort from many major countries for a war in the little known land of Afghanistan. Truly, the fate of the Afghans mattered to only a few, but the principles that the war represented struck chords across the globe. For this reason, Jews and Muslims called truce for a time. America, for her part, overlooked rulers and programs they did not support in favor of defeating Russia, as Russia had done in Vietnam.

The CIA, by nature, takes advantage of this world community. It places agents in as many countries as possible and gains valuable connections across the globe. Without this system being in place for years, such war efforts would never be possible.



Style

Perspective

The author tells this complicated story in third person. However, when the reader reflects on the fact that it is a work of nonfiction, he realizes that this work required a great deal of research. The author uses quotes from each of the key people, as well as leaders in Russia, Egypt and Pakistan, to name a few. In this rare instance, the omniscient third person is the author himself.

The action, however, follows the main characters, usually separately. The book opens in the life of Charlie Wilson, gives his background, but, after a few chapters, switches to Gust Avrakotos. It then gives much of Avrakotos's childhood and early career before switching back to Wilson. Usually the switches occur at the beginning of a new chapter. As the action picks up, however, and the paths of the characters cross, the switches happen more quickly.

Along with these perspectives, the author occasionally gives a human interest perspective, either by quoting a famous person in regards to the action as he does when he quotes Diane Sawyer's first take on the young Congressman Wilson. He also follows the soldier in the action, sometimes the Soviets and sometimes the Afghans, to give the reader an eye into what it may feel like to be there. The changes in perspective give what could be a dull, text-like story more life.

Tone

The reader will be surprised to learn that this book about a gruesome and costly war carries a lighthearted tone much of the time. Just when things seem heavy or technical, the reader counts on Wilson to pull a crazy stunt like throw an illegal champagne party on a naval ship. Or, Gust Avrakotos may tell his boss to "go fuck himself" then hide within the sterile halls of the CIA for months, drawing a paycheck but doing little work. Often, Avrakotos says those things that others may think but never utter. Wilson's antics and Avrakotos's brash personality give an otherwise dark story some personality.

Another challenge of such a complicated story is the level and amount of jargon. However, the author stops the action several times to explain confusing military and political actions. For example, he gives a vivid picture of the factory where General Dynamics makes Stinger rockets in California. Thus, the obscure weapon gains some personality, as the reader learns how they come out of a factory, much the way a car or appliance does.

Most of all, the author keeps the action moving. Each chapter contains more information than seems possible, but it all follows in a logical, but not always linear fashion.

Structure

This book contains an author's note, introduction, thirty-four chapters and an epilogue, along with source notes, acknowledgments and an index. The action of the story covers 523 pages. Such a volume, on war nonetheless, appears daunting. Given the amount of material to cover, one marvels that more pages were not required. The book proves dense with information, characters, and descriptive narratives.



Quotes

"No Congressman or senator in anyone's memory had ever succeeded in flouting the rules so repeatedly for so many years and managed to survive." p. 2

"'Charlie Did It' -President Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan, explaining the defeat of the Russians in Afghanistan." p. 4

"This book is the story of the biggest and most successful CIA campaign in history." p. 5

"It needs to be underscored that this is a true story. It's purely by coincidence that, as in any good spy novel, we happen to come up on the leading man in the beginning of this account surrounded by beautiful women." p. 7

"I would be sitting there where the button is, and if you're twenty-seven, it makes you feel very cocky knowing that here's Moscow, and here's Kiev, and if they fuck with us I'll just hit all these buttons." p. 27

"And most important for what he would alter do in Afghanistan, he had crossed over a line and, in effect, experimented with running his own foreign operation with a renegade operative who wasn't afraid to break the rules." p. 39

"This kind of talk is jarring, but it was the language of Aliquippa—and it shaped Avrakotos's brutal instinct for the jugular." p. 43

"There was no precedent for an American woman playing such a role on behalf of the Pakistani government, so Pakistan honored Herring with the official status of 'honorary man'; she was addressed as 'sir.'" P. 67

"The congressman might be received as a hero in Jerusalem, Cairo, and Islamabad, but when Wilson landed in the capital, there would be no brass band waiting for him, only a federal posse closing in to destroy him." p. 153

The United States might have lost its nerve, but Chairman Clarence D. Long, an elder of the College of Cardinals, had personally committed himself, the entire Appropriations Committee, and the government of the United States to pouring hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Pakistan and, specifically, to providing those marvelous Afghan warriors with the weapons they needed." p. 192.

"'I can tell you that we would not have been involved in Afghanistan had it not been for Charlie,' says Tony Coelho, the Democratic whip at the House. 'Most Members didn't know where Afghanistan was, and the majority didn't care.'" p. 265

"He even volunteered for the ultimate assignment: in the event of an all-out war with the Soviets, Vickers was to parachute into enemy territory with a small tactical nuclear weapon strapped to his leg. His mission was to place the device in a mountain pass or



some similar terrain to halt the advance of the Red Army. Theoretically, there would be time to escape the blast, but everyone knew this was a one-way mission." p. 297

"It was incredible stuff that most American minds are not devious enough to think up,' remembers Avrakotos. 'But if you've been around five thousand years like the Egyptians and survived, you come up with some great ways of killing your enemies.'" p. 318

"The object of the CIA's campaign, he wrote, was not to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan 'by all means available.'" p. 356

"Just the thought of Afghan tribesmen who had never seen a flush toilet signaling an American satellite to fire precision rounds at a Red Army stronghold was almost too much to believe." p. 392

"The Hind was suddenly just a broken toy drifting down from the sky, and from beside Ghaffar had come a second and third cry to Allah and now it was not just one, but three Hinds, splintered to destruction before their eyes. God was indeed great. It was a turning point. The Stinger worked, and the Afghans would soon demonstrate an uncanny ability to use this weapon." p 437

"Two things were more important than anything else, his father had taught him: there was never to much that he could do for his country, and he had to feel right about himself when he looked in the mirror." p. 440

"Robert Peck, the late deputy assistant secretary of state for the Near East offered a virtual eulogy in describing Wilson: 'Charlie made himself in many ways the central figure in the Afghan war. He did it by being an honest broker.'" p. 468

"The Kipling poem about the fate of the British who had come here began to haunt the Red Army: 'When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains, /And the women come out to cut up what remains, /Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains /An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.'" p. 489

"'In my whole life,' he said revealingly, 'I've never received bad news that didn't turn out to be true.'" p. 502

"These thing happened. They were glorious and they changed the world. And the people who deserved the credit are the ones who made the sacrifice. And then we fucked up the endgame." p. 523



Topics for Discussion

Explain the plot line of the story. When is the climax, the turning point?

Explain the role of upbringing in the personalities in this book.

What role does fatalism play in the war in Afghanistan?

Discuss the role of religion in the context of these events.

In what ways does Charlie Wilson show behavior atypical of a liberal Democrat?

Choose one unlikely relationship from the story and discuss it.

Cast this story as a movie. Who should play the main characters and why?

Discuss some facts you learned about politics as a result of this book.

Discuss some facts you learned about world events as a result of this book.

Do you agree that the war in Afghanistan brought down the Soviet empire? Why or why not?

What role does this war play in preceding the events of September 11, 2001? Could it have been avoided, given what you know from this book? Explain.

Explain why Charlie Wilson admires President Zia and why this is ironic.

Why does Wilson's passion about the Oerlikons turn ironic in the end?