

## Woodward on Bush's war: proof a book doesn't have to be good to be important

Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*.  
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Review by Lisa Van Dusen

The water-cooler take on Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein has long been that Woodward was the plodding, anal one and Bernstein was the fun twin — the guy who could write his way out of a fix on deadline, howl at the moon until 5 a.m., and then start all over again without passing go at either second thought or regret. *State of Denial*, more than any of Woodward's other books, proves that a book doesn't have to be good to be important, and that of the two halves that made up Woodstein, as legendary *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee famously dubbed them, Bernstein was indeed the writer and Woodward the stenographer.

Through 500 pages of exhaustively detailed insider accounts of how the Bush administration bungled the invasion, occupation and democratization of Iraq, Woodward dryly and with little regard for context or history compiles an indictment so overwhelming that it likely had as much to do with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's post-midterm election resignation as with the results themselves.

What *State of Denial* lacks in readability it makes up for in insight and intrigue. While the rest of the world watched, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell and Paul Wolfowitz made a frighteningly unconvincing and unsubstantiated case for war seem like just another day at the office. A stunning number of people, according

to the accounts they gave Bob Woodward, were shocked that the White House may have been manipulating what intelligence there was in order to further a unilateral political agenda, only somehow failed to tell the president or anyone else about their doubts.

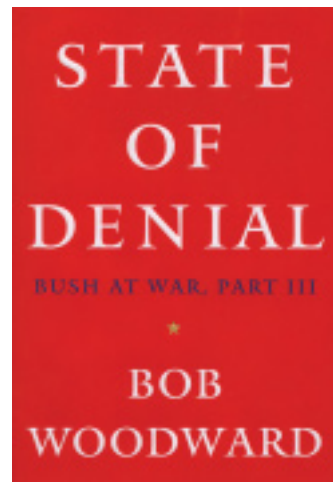
This is where Woodward's reporting methods come into question, and where the nature of political journalism in Washington is again exposed for the cat's cradle of intersecting and self-serving quid pro quos that it is. The first bargain Woodward makes in reporting his books is with his longtime employer, *The Washington Post*, which trades whatever breaking news it might get from his interviews for the prestige and publicity of being the keeper of the Woodward franchise every time he publishes another bestseller.

The second bargain is with the American people, who usually forego any benefits that might otherwise come from the knowledge of the information contained in that breaking news until long after it's actually unfolded. With *State of Denial*, Woodward actually erred on the side of the public interest in that the book was released September 30, more than a month before the November 7 midterms, which forced the president to abandon the administration's "stay the course" position on Iraq in the face of Woodward's reporting that, if there had been a course at

all, it had consisted of one mistake after another. The pre-election timing may also explain the thudding, colourless heft of the book, which reads like a series of unedited interview transcripts compiled by a researcher, interspersed with observations from Woodward inserted to lend a voice to something put together under severe time constraints.

The third and more complex set of bargains is with his sources, every one of whom but Rumsfeld appears to have either benefited from talking to him or suffered from not talking to him. In Rumsfeld's case, if he thought, like everyone else, he was trading access for favourable coverage, he was mistaken. Even without the context of how previous defence secretaries operated and how decisions were made at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld comes across as vain, self-serving, and generally incompetent. Why Bush refused to accept his resignation at least twice before finally back-slapping him out the door in November will presumably be explained in Woodward's next book.

Beginning with the book's title, many of Woodward's conclusions in this book are reached without regard to the shocking reality that sometimes, in Washington as in any government town only more so, journalists get used to furthering people's political or personal agendas. The title



refers to an observation passed on by one of Woodward's major sources and CIA leak investigation co-star, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Woodward describes Armitage's view that Tenet had stayed too long as CIA director, that he should have left after the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan and before the 2003 invasion of Iraq. "When you leave the government," said Armitage, "your IQ goes up 30 points." But Armitage's major worry

then, in November 2003, was the president's state of mind. Bush, surmised Woodward, surmising Armitage, was in denial about Iraq.

A few months earlier, at an April National Security Council meeting, weeks after the first US forces entered Iraq, when it was already becoming clear that the intelligence list of 946 suspected WMD sites was either wildly exaggerated or just plain wrong, and when the pro-Saddam *fedayeen* were

beginning the legwork of what would grow into a foreign-led insurgency and then a civil war, then-deputy national security advisor Stephen Hadley asked the president, in a private moment, how he was doing. "I made the decision," Bush said. "I sleep well at night." If that's a state, it ain't denial.

*Lisa Van Dusen is a former editor with UPI in Washington and former writer for ABC World News Tonight.*

# the art of the state

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