

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR _____ 7.5/10

Back when only commies committed war crimes

Book by George Crile

Screenplay by Aaron Sorkin

Directed by Mike Nichols

Tom Hanks ... Rep. Charlie Wilson

Amy Adams ... Bonnie Bach

Julia Roberts ... Joanne Herring

Philip Seymour Hoffman ... Gust Avrakotos

Joanne Herring: Why is Congress saying one thing and doing nothing?

Charlie Wilson: Well, tradition mostly.

Charlie Wilson's War is a good little movie. [Tom Hanks is like Clint Eastwood: no matter what they do, the film is always going to be fun and interesting to watch.] Hanks plays real life US Congressman Charles Wilson, a representative from the 2d Congressional district in East Texas 1973-1997.

He's from a relatively simple background and so are the people he serves: "They really don't want much, just leave them alone, let them have their guns, and be honest with them... they'll reelect you forever." Charlie is a good-hearted man who basically likes to party hearty; then one day in the early '80s while lounging in a hot tub with a Playboy Bunny and other 'associates' in Vegas he gets religion.

Well, not literally, but for no apparent reason his attention is drawn away from the ample pleasures at hand toward a tiny television screen showing Dan Rather in a broadcast from Afghanistan. The story is that the Afghans are fighting the Soviet invasion of troops, helicopters, and tanks with little more than WWI Enfield rifles and warm bodies. Refugee camps are swarming with millions of victims of the Soviet aggression—though I take all reports of atrocities alleged by US government agencies/MSM (mainstream media) with a planet-sized grain of salt, witnesses claim convincingly that the Soviets are mowing down and mangling women and children without mercy. It's a humanitarian disaster and Charlie is moved to act.

Now in his fifth term, Charlie has managed to become the second ranking member on an intelligence operations committee, so he has some power—along with the ear of the committee's chairman—to exercise some funding initiative for whoever he determines are the good guys. He actually takes a trip to Pakistan with his administrative staff leader Bonnie Bach (Amy Adams) to visit with the prime minister, to find out who's who and what's what.

Further, back in Texas a former lady-friend of substance Joanne Herring (Julia Roberts) has made support for the Afghan rebels a priority for her fundamentalist Christian anti-communist organization. The would-be lovers chat in Houston and determine something should be accomplished in a covert manner through Charlie's offices. Charlie returns to DC and proceeds to make a plan.

He's not happy with the CIA, and while he's on the discovery trip to Pakistan he drops into the CIA section office in the region for a debriefing. The head guy there tells Charlie that the idea is not to provoke the Russians, so all these things Wilson wants to do to help the Afghani people will be shot down by the section chief's higherups. Charlie is an easygoing fella, but the assertion that the CIA doesn't plan to do anything launches him like a bottle rocket: he tells his secretary to bring in to his office in Washington a CIA official "no lower than vice deputy director."

And in walks a salty old field agent Gust Avrakotos (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who's basically only a CIA "someone" who actually knows what's going on and cares enough to bring an effective policy to Afghanistan... and to counteract the killing fields. It's another bravo performance by Mr. Hoffman—Hanks is no slouch either, but let's just say his role doesn't demand much of him—who manages to package raw anger and genuine compassion into an irresistible intelligent force. Gust and Charlie are pretty much the same sort of guy: face the facts and do what common sense and simple morality tell you to do, regardless of the damage it may cause to the feelings of those who posture as leaders while "doing nothing."

And the rest is history. Certainly anyone can check into the facts of the Afghanistan Soviet invasion and the eventual defeat/retreat of the Russians by a dedicated guerilla movement sporting handheld Stinger missiles and other high-tech hardware acquired through the instigation of [guess who]. Is this a good movie? Yes, of course. I actually think for the scale of the film, it's one of the more mindful comic-dramatic treatments of a genuine military/foreign-intelligence adventure. But it's also good entertainment value, especially for giving us the colorful characterizations of all three principals: Wilson, Avrakotos—Charlie calls him Avocados—and Herring.

Naturally, male viewers will be drawn to the babe fest that Charlie has assembled as his Congressional aides, referred to as Charlie's Angels. Yet even the knockout brunette he calls "Jail Bait" manages to perform with professionalism; I think the real Charlie Wilson set up his office staff with a tongue-in-cheek slap at political correctness. He does manage to maximize his fun whatever the circumstances, and I find that fun-loving quality admirable. [In the office, or away, Charlie seems to be perpetually drinking the finest Scotch, on the rocks... and offering it to his visitors, even redneck preachers.]

There's an exchange when one such preacher man, wanting Charlie to fight the ACLU on a Nativity scene at city hall, he pauses to inquire:

Larry Liddle: Miss?

Charlie's Angel #1: Yes sir?

Larry Liddle: It seems to me lookin' around, that it's almost all women workin' here; and that they're all very pretty. Is that common?

Charlie's Angel #1: Well... Congressman Wilson, he has an expression. He says uhh, "You can teach them to type, but you can't teach them to grow tits."

Larry Liddle: Well, that's... charming.

Charming, indeed.

Finally, I simply have to get in a political rant here on the obvious parallels between the Soviet aggression on Afghanistan in the 1980s and the US government's aggression on Afghanistan and Iraq today. In both cases hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of those two countries were killed, and in both cases several million human beings were and have been displaced. In the case of US aggression, the natives also have the benign gift of depleted uranium poisoning that keeps on giving for (basically) ever. In terms of humanitarian catastrophe: Advantage: the present day US aggression. [In some of the earlier scenes of Charlie Wilson, which show helicopter gunships raining down hellfire on scattering peasants, I could swear we were watching realtime military operations by the US government's highly trained teams of contract killers.]

But Charlie Wilson's War gives us a blast from the past when at least, with a fair stretch of the imagination, we could believe at least some of the personnel associated with the American imperial state were the good guys.

###

2008 April 25

Copyright © Brian Wright | *The Coffee Coaster*™

Charlie Wilson's War | Tom Hanks | *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*