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## Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times,

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Crile, George. *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times*. New York: Grove, 2004. 560pp. \$14.95

A longtime best seller in its tenth printing, this important book received a boost in December 2007 when the popular movie of the same name brought this story—CIA's secret proxy war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union—to the big screen. Crile's painstaking account of the complex chain of events and of the powerful personalities that produced the most successful covert war in U.S. history is the result of extensive research, countless interviews, travel, and personal interaction with most of the key characters in this real-life drama. Over a period of fifteen years of research and reporting, George Crile traveled repeatedly to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Israel and throughout the United States to interview the many who played prominently in bringing about the Afghan mujahideen victory over the Soviet Union's Red Army in early 1989.

Reading more like a good spy novel than the historical and factual piece of reporting that it is, the book takes the reader through the fascinating story of how the CIA gained support and achieved victory due, in large measure, to the backing and behind-the-scenes political and relationship maneuverings of Texas congressman Charlie Wilson and CIA operative Gust Avrakotos. The extensive cast of characters includes many other prominent figures in the U.S. government; Texas society; and the governments and intelligence services of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and

Israel. The author's source notes at the end of the book give a sense of the grand scope of this story, which is still playing out today.

Crile's career, spanning thirty years with CBS, most notably as a producer for *60 Minutes* and *60 Minutes II*, positioned him to be a part of this epic as it unfolded. A two-time winner of the Edgar R. Murrow Award for broadcast journalism, he shows his penchant for bringing a complex story to the reader in an evocative, entertaining, and compelling way.

For students of national-security decision making, foreign policy, U.S. and international politics, and the processes that ultimately result in decisive action, this book provides an insight into how things really transpired during the Reagan administration's support of the Afghan freedom fighters. The author's epilogue, a valuable resource for the student interested in the history and effects of this period, examines the long-term unintended consequences of both U.S. support and periods of nonsupport over four presidential administrations. Some of these consequences include the current negative opinion of the United States in the Muslim world, the rise of radical Islam, the attacks of September 11, 2001, and our ongoing conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

George Crile passed away in 2006. Although he did not live to see his story come to life as a full-length motion picture, he would probably have been pleased to see the renewed interest and intellectual curiosity that the film has brought to his important chronicle of a pivotal time in our history. There are countless lessons and insights here for national security professionals and those interested in the messy processes

and decisions that result in world-changing events.

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Dugard, Martin. *The Training Ground: Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Davis in the Mexican War, 1846–1848*. New York: Little, Brown, 2008. 446pp. \$29.99

The English novelist C. S. Forester once observed, concerning soldiers in war, that it was a “coincidence that when destiny had so much to do she should find tools of such high quality ready to hand.” This comment aptly describes the human story line woven throughout *The Training Ground*, Martin Dugard’s spirited and nearly blow-by-blow account of the major battles of the Mexican War. Dugard, author of *The Last Voyage of Columbus* (2005), has written a robust narrative of this conflict describing President James K. Polk’s ambition to expand the territory of the United States. Reaching beyond the formal history, Dugard uses the strong personalities, individual battlefield accomplishments, and close relationships among a small group of professional soldiers who actually fought the war to bring his story to life.

These soldiers, West Point graduates and well-drilled junior officers in a meager U.S. Army, were the human tools “ready to hand” in 1846. Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, William Sherman, Jefferson Davis, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, and others with names remembered today were first exposed to the hardships and brutality of warfare in the conflict with Mexico. The experience gained in combat tactics, engineering, and logistics by this

“brotherhood” hardened its veterans and taught them to lead, lessons that would be evident during the much more horrific bloodshed that was to take place in the U.S. Civil War.

Dugard relates numerous stories of these young officers and their friendships: of Lee assisted by a young George McClellan and supported by Jackson’s mobile gun batteries; “Sam” Grant and Davis charging together into battle; “Pete” (actually James) Longstreet serving as best man at Grant’s postwar wedding; the calmness of Grant and his keen battlefield observation under fire; the savagery of Jackson’s energy; the frustration of Sherman while posted in California; and the courageous, almost supernatural, professionalism of Lee.

In the end, Mexico City and Mexico were conquered, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in July 1848, ended the war. Mexico lost vast portions of its northern states, including California, while the still-young United States nearly doubled in size.

The spare and honest Grant wrote of his experiences in Mexico, “I would like to see a truthful history written. Such a history will do full credit to the courage, endurance, and soldierly ability of the American citizen, no matter what section of the country he hailed from, or in what ranks he fought.” As Dugard’s brisk and engrossing story forecasts, the competence of this small brotherhood would be put to the fullest test during the long and bitter conflict between the states. This later war was fought with great determination and violence by the men whom destiny had trained on the same ground—the West Point veterans of the Mexican War.

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