



The scoundrel meets the beauty queen

Legal Eagle

The vision of rogue Congressman Charlie Wilson

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR: Directed by Mike Nichols. Written by Aaron Sorkin. Cinematography, Stephen Goldblatt. Music, James Newton Howard. Starring Tom Hanks, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Amy Adams. Universal Pictures, 2007. R. 97 minutes. ★★★★★

Early in *Charlie Wilson's War*, a speaker intones that without Charlie Wilson, history "would be largely and sadly different." Whether history would be largely different without Wilson — a U.S. congressman from Texas for 25 years — is debatable but probably accurate, but the reference to sadness caught my attention. Wilson, a buoyant rascal, elevated revelry to an art form, so whether history would have been gloomier without him is beyond a

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shadow of a doubt. What makes the story of *Charlie Wilson's War* so irresistible is how a scoundrel and hard-drinking womanizer like Wilson (Tom Hanks) stumbles into the crossroads of history and, once there, has the good sense to stand his ground. What makes *Charlie Wilson's War* one of the year's best films is how artfully the screenplay plays Wilson's weaknesses into strengths.

If you enjoyed *The West Wing*, the walking-and-talking political drama about a fictional liberal administration, you'll be right at home with *Charlie Wilson's War*. They share the same writer, Aaron Sorkin (who also created *Sports Night*), and more importantly, they share Sorkin's intellectual curiosity and gift for verbal dynamite. Sorkin has always had high ideals, but he's been easy to dismiss

as high-minded and tweedy because those ideals are often pouring out of the mouths of refined elites. Not in *Charlie Wilson's War*: Sorkin has found the perfect foil not only in Wilson, a coarse philanderer, but in Gus Avrakotos (Philip Seymour Hoffman), Wilson's brilliant but irritable contact at the CIA for whom the term coarse is a gross understatement. Wilson is a man for whom business tends to interfere with pleasure, if not multiple pleasures; Avrakotos knows no pleasure we can see, save one: blowing the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

Completing the trio is Joanne Herring (Julia Roberts), the Houston socialite and former beauty queen who inspires Wilson to look into Afghanistan. (Actually, the trio is a quartet if Wilson's sweet, moral assistant, Bonnie Bach, is included. Amy Adams is sensational in this small but sturdy role.) According to Herring, the place to see Afghanistan is Pakistan, where Wilson encounters three million Afghan refugees. Those who haven't died wait to be martyred. Wilson discovers that Afghan rebels are using rifles and mortars against the Russians — essentially, sticks and rocks — while the Russians are sailing overhead in state of the art, rocket-equipped helicopters. What the rebels need are heat-seeking Stinger missiles; Wilson serves on the subcommittee that can make those missiles a reality. Only politics — personal, national and global — stands in Wilson's way.

Charlie Wilson's War is a lightly drawn, ideas-driven satire of an almost unbelievable episode in American politics. It isn't deep, nor is it what I would call a closely observed film. The film is talky and a little humid at the outset, but as each person enlisted by Avrakotos seems progressively more clever, so does the film become more enjoyable with each passing sequence. The performances are among the best this year, particularly by Hanks and Hoffman, whose easy but alert rapport should earn them many nominations. The tone of *Charlie Wilson's War* is sometimes inconsistent, but the message surely is not: Afghanistan was pried from the Soviets' grip by the aid of a most unlikely hero only to fall under Taliban control when we neglected to win the peace. It remains a victory that was profoundly incomplete. **EW**

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