

POLITICS & POLICY

# The Rehabilitation of Charlie Wilson

From booze-guzzling, skirt-chasing, check-kiting Congressman to American hero in—you guessed it—twelve steps.



By John Spong

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A lot of terms were used to describe seventy-one-year-old former U.S. congressman Charlie Wilson when he represented deep East Texas on Capitol Hill from 1973 to 1996, and “hero” was not typically among them. “Hopeless alcoholic” was. So too was “pussy hound.” And the occasional, less colorful term, like “self-serving” or “vindictive.” He was reputed to be a hard-drinking, coke-snorting, skirt-chasing, lightweight lawmaker, a water carrier for the timber industry, and worst of all, a pork barrel liberal. As he’ll cheerfully point out, not all those descriptions were intended as compliments. Though folks back home always loved him, up in D.C. there were plenty of people who considered him a joke, more notable for the good-looking women he squired around the world on the federal dime than any law he ever authored or sponsored.

When he retired, eight years ago, mention of Good Time Charlie Wilson in the history books looked to be relegated to a humorous (hopefully) footnote, his most significant achievement being that those same “personal qualities,” to use the term loosely, that inspired investigations by the House Ethics Committee at least three known times—for cocaine use in 1982, writing hot checks to the House bank in 1992, and making illegal personal loans from his

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campaign account in 1995—were practically celebrated behind the Pine Curtain, where, beginning in 1960, he was elected to public office eighteen times—three to the Texas House, three to the Texas Senate, and twelve to the Congress. That, plus the fact that he gave utterance to the most stupefying, yet somehow non-suicidal, political quote this side of former Louisiana governor Edwin “Fast Eddie” Edwards’s famous “live boy, dead girl” crack. In a 1988 *Ms. Magazine* piece by Molly Ivins, he provided the following justification for the hiring practices that had earned his secretarial staff the nickname Charlie’s Angels: “You can teach ’em to type, but you can’t teach ’em how to grow tits.”

And that easily could have been the final word on his legacy. But last May, *60 Minutes* producer George Crile published a book called *Charlie Wilson’s War*. It told a story not widely known beyond retired CIA spooks and cold war scholars, of how a lone congressman in the eighties had channeled more than \$3 billion to Afghan rebels fighting the Soviet Red Army and how that aid had ended the cold war. *Charlie Wilson’s War* debuted in the ninth spot on the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list, and its unlikely hero became the star of C-SPAN specials and book fairs. A Hollywood movie company bought the rights to his life story. Suddenly Charlie Wilson, Party Boy, became Charlie Wilson, Patriot. When former U.S. Speaker Jim Wright, whose own career had ended in a scandal that was perfectly boring compared with the stuff Charlie had pulled, got his first look at Crile’s book, he said to a friend, “There’s not even a post office named for me back in Fort Worth, and Charlie Wilson got a whole damn war?”

This then is the story of how one man built for himself a new reputation. It was no easy thing for Charlie to do, and true to form, he avoided the conventional path. But for anyone who has ever felt the sting of being dismissed as a “drunken playboy,” it’s a relief to know that there is a way to redemption. It’s a twelve-step program for the rehabilitation of a scoundrel.

## Step One: Bring Down an Evil Empire

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Standing today in his office at Wilson Associates, the D.C. lobbying firm he started three years ago, Charlie plays up both patriot and rascal. Tall, handsome, and resolute, with small American-flag cuff links and red-white-and-blue suspenders laced through epaulets on his shoulders, he points a long arm at the pictures and plaques covering nearly every inch of wall space. There are photos with five past presidents—“Bill Clinton used to say I was the only congressman who didn’t need an appointment to see him, as long as I didn’t come understaffed.” And there are paintings of the naval destroyer he served on in the fifties and of the Battle of Midway—“That shows the first bomb hit of the *Akagi*, the aircraft carrier that had been the Japanese flagship at Pearl Harbor. We sank four of their carriers that day, and it changed the war.”

But the talk in Charlie’s office always comes around to Afghanistan, maybe because of his other mementos—photos of Afghan warriors, the missile launcher that fired the first Stinger missile to shoot down a Russian helicopter—but more likely because that is what people want to hear. He’s an old pol who still talks in stump speeches, and the one he delivers on the Soviet-Afghan War is well rehearsed: “There were one hundred sixty-seven funerals in my district for local boys who lost their lives in Vietnam, and I have always blamed every one of them on the Soviet Union’s support of North Vietnam.” When Charlie learned in late 1982 that the Afghan mujahideen, “noble warriors armed only with knives and stones,” were putting up a decent fight against the occupying Red Army, he saw an opportunity to give a little grief back.

Crile’s book details how that thought grew into the largest covert operation in history. As the only member of the House appropriations defense subcommittee without a military base or a defense contractor in his district, Charlie was uniquely situated to get the job done. By voting to fund all the other subcommittee members’ projects, he ensured that those members would fall in line when his pet cause came up. The CIA’s secret sponsorship of the mujahideen, whom Charlie calls “the muj” (pronounced “mooj”), became that pet cause. He started small by defense budget standards

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securing \$15 million in 1983. By the end of the operation, the total sent from the U.S. was more than \$3 billion.

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The money went primarily for weapons and ammunition, an area in which Charlie had more than a casual interest. He was a 1956 graduate of the Naval Academy and dressed in his Navy whites when he showed up in Austin as a freshman state representative in 1960. An obsessive reader, he had become something of an unaccredited military historian by the time he fell in love with the muj, and that know-how, combined with the charm he'd always used to escape the fallout of his civilian after-hours exploits, served him well with the subcommittee. "Initially he got funding by sheer force of his personality," says Robert Livingston, a former U.S. representative from Louisiana who also served on the defense subcommittee. "But he regularly went over to Afghanistan to see what they needed. He'd come back and say, 'Look, the muj have to clear those Russian land mines, and somebody's figured out a way to fire a ball with a detonator cord attached to it out one hundred fifty yards, explode the cord, and knock out all the land mines.' He said he'd seen it work, so we funded it."

By 1986 it was starting to look like the muj were capable of more. That year President Ronald Reagan gave the green light to the delivery of American-made Stinger missiles to Afghanistan, a weapon Charlie thought would change the course of the conflict. Until then, Russian helicopters had freely terrorized Afghan camps and villages. But the Stingers were lightweight, easy to use, and deadly accurate, and with their introduction, the Russian

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dominance of the skies ended. Two and a half years later, the Red Army withdrew, “their butts kicked,” as Charlie’s version concludes, “by a bunch of barefoot shepherds who had never seen a commode.”

It might seem exaggerated to give the efforts of one man credit for ending Eastern Bloc communism. But there’s no disputing the way the dominoes fell —Hungary, Poland, East Germany—after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989. The old cold warriors say that’s because the Red Army never recovered. Two years later, the whole Soviet Union would be a memory.

## Step Two: Bring That Empire Down With Style

When his colleagues in the Texas Legislature remember the six-foot-four, rail-thin son of an accountant from the small town of Trinity, they talk first about his attire: Buckled dress shoes. Painfully loud ties. Pants that fit so tight it was figured he had to grease his heels to pull them on. Speculation at the time was that there must have been a filling station somewhere between Austin and Lufkin where Charlie would change clothes when he drove back to the district.

He made no such effort to reign himself in for the Afghanistan operation. Whenever he flew to Asia to work on the war, be it to check on the muj or lobby their neighbors, he always took one of his girlfriends, women his staff knew as “the rotation.”

And never once did conventional wisdom or common sense get in his way. In an early drive to find a shoulder-fired missile for the Muslim-by-definition muj, Charlie solicited, and received, a design from Israel. When the Soviets targeted and killed great numbers of mules and camels needed to caravan weapons to the field, Charlie flew in Tennessee mules. When the CIA refused to provide field radios for fear that muj transmissions would be picked up by the Russians, Charlie’s administrative assistant, Charlie Schnabel, bought \$12,000 worth of walkie-talkies at a Virginia Radio Shack and took these to the war. And when the medical needs of the wounded muj proved too great

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for Afghan medicine, Charlie brought them to America for treatment. On one occasion, two muj from rival tribes who were recovering in the same facility went at each other with knives. “After a couple of these bad situations, we tried to put just one in each hospital,” says Charlie.

## Step Three: Build Up Enough Stories About Your Bad Behavior That You Can Stop Behaving Badly

Charlie came of age as a public servant in Lieutenant Governor Ben Barnes’s Texas Senate. It was a different time, one wistfully recalled as a rocking and rolling period in Texas political history, with parties that lasted whole weekends and senators making drunken speeches on the chamber floor. Barnes says Charlie was no worse than the rest, but he does remember driving to an Austin Chamber of Commerce breakfast at about six-thirty one morning and finding Charlie sitting on the curb near the Capitol, still dressed in the green suit he’d worn the day before. Charlie said he’d been locked out of his nearby apartment after coming home too late from a night on the town.

There was no appreciable change in Charlie when he went to D.C. One of the reasons his Afghan maneuvering stayed out of the news was that his partying played so well in the headlines. There were the cocaine charges, of which he was ultimately cleared in 1983. And then there was a famous drunk-driving episode when, on the way home for the “hot” part of a hot date, he smashed his Lincoln into a Mazda on D.C.’s Key Bridge. He sped home from the scene to escape the cops and get some sleep before catching an early-morning flight to Peshawar with members of the Appropriations Committee. He later paid a \$25 fine for a misdemeanor charge of causing an accident.

His friends and staff eventually began to worry. Longtime running buddy Larry L. King, the author of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, persuaded Charlie to attend some Alcoholics Anonymous meetings after King quit drinking in the early eighties. Charlie’s only comment on the experience now is “There were some good-looking chicks there, but I never had a serious

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romance with one.” In 1985 he collapsed at an air show in Paris and was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, a fatty heart. If it was not the result of a lifetime of boozing, it was certainly a cue to stop, and a series of doctors told him that if he drank again he’d die. He stayed sober for a year and a half, until a New Year’s Eve glass of champagne sent him back down the hill.

Finally, in 1998, Charlie changed his mind and quit for good. He’s not entirely insightful when he reflects on it. “I had quit before, for nine months, eighteen months, a week and a half,” he says. “But this time I just made up my mind. Now I’ve managed, without going to drunk school, to stay off whiskey. I’ve never said I’ll never drink again, but I’m pretty sure I’m not going to have a drink tonight.” It may just be that after fifty years of thoroughly enjoyable hard-drinking escapades, he is finally content with just telling the stories.

## Step Four: Remind the World How Bad You Were to Reinforce How Good You Have Become

“Lyndon Johnson’s Secret Service guys were just assholes,” says Charlie, “and when they showed up in Austin, they would literally shoulder your ass off the damn sidewalk when they walked by. Well, one night my first wife and I were going to a wedding rehearsal dinner at the Driskill, and it was raining like hell. But just as we pulled up, somebody pulled out of a parking space right out in front of the hotel, right under the awning. So we parked the car and went in and partied. And when we stumbled out later, one of these Secret Service agents had double-parked his Buick so it was impossible to get my car out. And he’d taken his keys upstairs and gone to bed.

“Well, as Allah would have it, I had been having trouble with the lock on my Buick, so I had been to the dealership that day and gotten a whole ring of General Motors keys to try out on my car. When I took out the keys, my wife said, ‘You’re not going to do that, are you?’ and I said, ‘Yep, I sure am.’ So here

I am, in a tuxedo, in the rain, and on the fifth key I try, that f—ing Secret Service car opens. I said, ‘I can’t let this go by,’ and I took the now about eight

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or nine blocks and found an alley and hid it. Then I rubbed all my fingerprints off—not the last time I’d do that—and ran back, just drenched, to the Driskill. They didn’t find that car for something like ten days.”

## Step Five: Stick Close by the People Who Always Stuck Close by You

Early last November, Charlie signed copies of *Charlie Wilson’s War* at the new history center in Diboll. To the piped-in strains of Sousa marches, nearly a thousand visitors filed in past a local ROTC color guard to swarm a table where Charlie, wearing his elder statesman’s gray suit and a big, honest grin, shook hands and autographed books. The only thing audible over the din of the crowd and the Sousa was Charlie’s booming laugh.

When Charlie was in Congress, his staff was repeatedly cited as the number one provider of constituent services, helping the “home folks,” as Charlie still calls them, get the IRS out of their hair and their social security and veteran’s benefits into the bank. The key was his rolling office. The district was large enough to receive funding for two satellite offices, but Charlie spent that money on a tour bus, which he would take twice a year to every community in the Piney Woods. One opponent for Charlie’s congressional seat tried to convince voters that it was a federally funded party van. East Texans who waited in long lines in Kroger parking lots to board the bus and tell Charlie their problems knew better.

Longtime district office director Shawn Davis, who was at the book signing, recounted how much Charlie enjoyed making the home folks feel like somebody. Like the times he escorted visiting defense contractors to a tiny machine shop outside Orange. Or the line item Charlie finagled into a transportation bill that appropriated funds for three American airports: New York, LaGuardia; Chicago, O’Hare; and Center, Texas, Municipal.

“When the day was done,” says Charlie, “the working people knew I was on their side, and the blacks knew I was on their side. And it’s hard to explain, but there is a tolerance for human frailty that doesn’t exist outside of East

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Texas.” Once, a Houston TV station sent a news crew to Lufkin during the cocaine investigation. An old farmer in overalls was interviewed sitting on the tailgate of his pickup. When the reporter asked what he thought about his congressman possibly using cocaine, the farmer lifted his gimme cap, scratched his head, and said, “I remember when a fifth of scotch would do it for Charlie.”

At the end of the book signing, Charlie opted against the formality of a microphone when he rose to address his people. He opened with a reviewer’s summation of the book’s protagonist: “‘Rarely can the prefix ‘the Honourable’ have been less appropriate. The man’—he means me—‘was a drunken, shiftless, ignorant, lying, drug-taking, zipper-flipping, corrupt, power-crazed cretin.’” Charlie flashed the special get-a-load-of-that smile he saves for the unpersuaded and announced, “That was written by some Australian ‘prevert.’” The crowd laughed, and Charlie grew serious. “The good Lord blessed me with the world’s most tolerant and forgiving constituency, and I want to thank you for that,” he said. “Despite every embarrassment, you trooped to the polls and gave me your votes year after year.”

“We gave you those votes because you gave us such wonderful service!” said a woman in the crowd.

“Well, I hope you know I tried my best to earn them.”

## Step Six: Tell the Stories That Tie You to Your People

“When I first ran for the Texas House, in 1960,” says Charlie, “the big issue was dogs. Poor folks wanted to be able to hunt deer with dogs. There was a subculture in East Texas called the ‘dog men,’ working people who barely made ends meet but would still feed eight or ten dogs and turn ‘em loose to chase down deer. Now, the state law was that you couldn’t chase a deer with a dog. That was the law. But at some point a very clever Piney Woods populist had stuck in the law except for wounded deer. So a dog man would simply shoot a gun in the air and let his dogs go, and if he got caught by the game

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warden, he'd just say, 'Ah, hell, I thought I'd hit him.' But the people with property did not want those damn dogs chasing deer on their land. So that issue separated the haves from the have-nots.

“Of course, I had been gone in the Navy, and I didn't understand anything when I got back, with just a month before the primary. I thought we were going to talk about taxes and appropriations, the big things. But about two weeks into it this rumor got started that I was against the dogs, and it was hurting me bad. So we had a rally at the football stadium in Huntington. It was just overflowing, probably two or three thousand people there, and I needed to convince each of them that I was for the dog. When it came my time to speak, I was led up to the stand by nine beautiful, howling, black-and-tan hound dogs. The crowd went f—ing crazy. It was probably nine or ten minutes before I could do my oration. I forget where we'd borrowed the dogs, but of course, I claimed they belonged to my daddy. From that moment on I was king of the dog men, and I had dogs with me every state campaign I ran.”

## Step Seven: Find the Right Woman

Charlie had been known as a ladies' man in Austin when, as a philandering state legislator, he would step over the rail on the Senate floor without breaking stride to talk to a pretty girl. That image flowered in 1981, when he moved into a bachelor pad-town house with a God's-eye view of D.C. There he famously maintained a hot tub in the bedroom and dangled handcuffs from the bedpost. All the members of the rotation passed through, women he gave nicknames like Snowflake, Sweetums, Tornado, and Firecracker. One girlfriend, who features prominently in Charlie's mythology, was variously identified by envious male friends of his as Miss Venezuela, Miss Brazil, Miss USA, Miss World, and Miss Nude Honduras. (For the record, she was Miss USA.)

The only relevant nickname and title now belong to the same woman: Babs, or as her postman knows her, Mrs. Wilson. In 1999 Charlie settled down. He first met Barbara Alberstadt in the late seventies, when she was a ballerina with a white satin rose in her brunette chignon; she had been

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enlisted to choreograph a Democratic party fundraiser that Charlie was emceeding. For his part, Charlie was finally getting a divorce from his first wife, Jerry, a sweet, smart Texas blonde nicknamed Goose and eternally identified as “long-suffering.” He was predictably intrigued by the young ballerina. Friends warned Barbara that Charlie was trouble; she found him thoughtful, and they dated for three years. When she gave what he calls a “play me or trade me” marriage ultimatum, he told her he just wasn’t ready. And he wasn’t. But seventeen years later they met up again. It was a month after Charlie had quit drinking, and nine months later they were married.

“I don’t have any doubt that without Barbara, who just doesn’t like the taste of alcohol, I couldn’t have sustained sobriety,” says Charlie. They are together almost constantly, in the mornings when he makes phone calls from the house before going to lobby old colleagues on the Hill and on the occasional trips back to Texas to sign books and give speeches. “I let her get away once, and I regretted it from the moment she walked out of the room,” says Charlie. “Not everybody gets two bites at the apple.” On special nights she greets him at the door of that same D.C. town house in her commando outfit: a black turtleneck, Army-issued camouflage cargo pants (that she swears haven’t been altered), dainty, high-heeled Army-style boots, and a white satin rose in her hair. “Charlie likes to joke that he got his marriage license and his Medicare card all in the same year,” says Barbara. “Neither of us has ever been happier.”

## Step Eight: Get Rich

In late March, at the Dulles Airport Marriott, Charlie met with a Texas company seeking favor on the Hill. He walked into the meeting the same way he has a thousand others: the John Wayne swagger, a pretty blond staffer at his side (on this occasion an international affairs expert named Jennie Quick), and a loud “Good afternoon,” delivered in the back-of-the-throat drawl of pure Texas power. The only real difference between Charlie now and twenty years ago is some overdue gray hair, a slight paunch (which he

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attributes to a recent bout with pneumonia and vows to be rid of soon), and the fact that he is officially, proudly on the take.

Charlie has a new rotation these days: a dozen or so lobbying clients, mostly with ties to the defense industry. His Marriott meeting was with Robert Jensen, the CEO of Kenyon International Emergency Services, a subsidiary of Texas funeral home giant SCI specializing in mass fatalities. Jensen was once an Army mortuary officer, and he built Kenyon into a sort of worldwide undertaker for catastrophic events. The company had hired Charlie to help secure the mass grave excavation contract in Iraq.

Charlie started lobbying after he left Congress, and since opening his own firm, in 2001, he has taken in about \$1.1 million a year. Half of that pays for his two-woman staff and rent on his elegant Market Square office on Pennsylvania Avenue. The other half is Charlie's.

His biggest client is Pakistan, which has paid him \$30,000 a month since 1997. Charlie has been a true believer of Pakistan's since its intelligence agency served as a middleman in arming the muj, and he contends that with closer ties, the U.S. could have prevented, or at least better monitored, the problems that developed there in the nineties: its transformation into a breeding ground for terrorists, 1998's nuclear bomb test, and the recently disclosed sales of nuclear secrets to North Korea, Iran, and Libya. He counts the State Department's March announcement that Pakistan will be granted major non-NATO ally status, something he worked hard on for years, as a significant step in that direction.

His work for Kenyon has been more tedious than tough. He spent the better part of February making calls to D.C. and Baghdad, trying to find the parties responsible for doling out the \$7 million earmarked for mass graves within the \$87 billion appropriated to rebuild Iraq. He had no luck. "That's not unusual," he says. "One of those big umbrella companies in Iraq—Halliburton, DynCorp, Bechtel—may have the money, but they ain't going to dig up the graves. They are going to sub it out." He had an assurance for

Jensen, though, who was preparing a trip to Iraq to suss out the situation.

"We will find the money, unless some bastard has already spent it," he said.

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“In the meantime, you come back from Iraq with a specific two or three million dollars to spend on a specific mass grave, and I feel sure I can get that appropriated in the next fiscal year.” Having read the book on Charlie, Jensen was pleased.

## Step Nine: Become the Subject of A Best-selling Book

Although a 1989 60 Minutes segment on the Soviet-Afghan War took its title, “Charlie Did It,” from a quote by Pakistan’s late president Zia ul-Haq, Crile thought he had merely reported a conventional story about a backroom operator. It was good TV but not quite a book. A year later he was back in Asia, traveling as Charlie’s guest on a tour of the Middle East. With them was Gust Avrakotos, a tough son of Greek immigrants and a former CIA agent who had spent his career at odds with the agency’s Ivy League leadership. When their plane broke down in Basra, Crile watched Avrakotos persuade local officials to get them on another plane. “He told them who Charlie was and convinced them that they could win points with Allah if they got us to Baghdad,” says Crile. “Then, on the flight, Gust explained how Charlie had terrorized the senior leadership of the CIA. Gust himself was an intimidating figure, and I came to realize that something had gone on between the two of them, that together they had hijacked foreign policy and this covert war and that they had made it work.”

That relationship became the heart of the book, which took Crile thirteen years of stops and starts to complete. “The big problem was believing that any of this was true,” he says. “Most of my time was spent checking out each unlikely story, following it down a path that always led to something even more bizarre.” According to Crile, the decisive battle of the Soviet-Afghan War was the victory of the two zealous black sheep over reluctant CIA blue bloods. It’s a romantic premise, although some in the CIA are unhappy with the way they are cast in the book. “It’s a funny thing,” says Charlie, “to be hated by people who can kill you with one hand.”

**You’re Reading Your First Free Article | Already a subscriber? [Log In](#)** The publication of the book has redefined the autumn of Charlie’s years. **SUBSCRIBE NOW** “Before the book and Barbara,” he says, “I’d probably have retired to South

Beach and watched the Rollerbladers.” Instead, he’s now in greater demand than ever, as a lobbyist and a lecturer. The crowds come because of his experience; they leave talking about how well he tells a story.

## Step Ten: Don’t Put It All in the Book; Save Something for Your Stump Speech

“I was in a cave one night in Afghanistan—and I love being able to say, ‘I was in a cave one night’—with a warrior named Hagani,” says Charlie. “He was telling me, through an interpreter, ‘Mr. Wilson, I am humiliated because it is custom in my country to give a visitor a gift, and I have no gift to give you. And you are the most important guest we will ever have.’ I of course explained to him that no gift was expected nor appropriate. But he continued to insist, and so I said, ‘Well, it would really mean a lot for me to go back to Washington and tell my colleagues that I had interviewed some captured Russian helicopter pilots.’

“About forty-five minutes later they brought in a couple of twenty-year-olds who looked absolutely terrified. But I soon learned that they were not Russians; they were Afghans that had been recruited in Kabul by the Soviets’ puppet government.

“So I said, ‘Tell the commander that I am very grateful, but that what I would really like to do is talk to a couple of captured Russians.’ And there was a lot of talk before the interpreter looked at me, and, I’ll never forget it, he said, ‘Commander Hagani is further humiliated because you have made a simple request and he cannot honor it. But he says that if you will give him two weeks’ notice before your next visit, he will save you two or three Russians.’ That was pretty striking; I knew not to ask where the Russian pilots had gone. They’d been carved up. That’s where they’d gone, into little pieces.”

## Step Eleven: Make Your Apologies But Only Where

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On the matter of his personal failings, Charlie has always been appropriately, honestly regretful. “Anything that failed in my marriage was one hundred percent my fault, and I’ve always felt extremely bad about that,” he says. It’s a measure of his sincerity that he’s still friendly with Goose.

But there are people who question the wisdom of his war. Crile’s book chronicled a secret history, but the developments in Afghanistan in the nineties and now are all too familiar after September 11. The U.S. snuck out of Afghanistan once the Soviets left, and in the ensuing chaos emerged the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden, holy warriors who thought they’d just defeated a superpower on their own. Critics add that not only did we arm them with confidence, we armed them with arms. Now we’re at war against them.

Charlie doesn’t second-guess himself. For one thing, he says, the most significant weapons we left over there, the Stingers, no longer work. “The batteries are all dead,” he says. It sounds ridiculously simple, but according to Charles Heyman, a senior military expert with the highly respected intelligence magazine *Jane’s*, Charlie’s right. “Think of a high-tech weapon as being like an ice sculpture,” says Heyman. “As soon as it’s delivered, it starts to melt, because of the growth of more technology and because of what is required to keep it operational.” There is no evidence of any of those Stingers being used outside of the Soviet-Afghan War.

And according to Charlie, today’s emboldened Muslim terrorists are not yesterday’s Afghan rebels but Arabs who came late to the fray: “The Arabs did not fight the Russians. They wrote checks and got their passports stamped so they could say they were part of the muj. I was with the warriors four times a year, and there was never a f—ing Arab anywhere near where the bullets were flying.” The oft-cited vacuum that America left for the Taliban to fill was unavoidable, as one former CIA agent put it, once “the Afghans went back to being Afghans.” Amid the resumption of the historical tribal fighting, rebuilding the country was impossible. “I had used up every political card I had, and they were tired of listening to me,” says Charlie on

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trying to keep Congress engaged in Afghanistan while the U.S. was basking in its cold war victory.

On a day in late March when the news was filled with reports that al Qaeda mastermind Ayman al-Zawahiri was encircled in Pakistan, Charlie had a reminder for the critics: “You think this f—er they’re chasing around now in the tribal areas of Pakistan is terrifying? Well, what was terrifying was a nuclear exchange between us and the Russians. What was terrifying was the idea of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe and what we would have had to do about that. I have absolutely zero regrets.”

## Step Twelve: Have Tom Hanks Play You in the Movie

Once you’ve been immortalized by the man who saved Private Ryan, you can endure a lot of backsliding on the other eleven steps. But this may be the one that causes Charlie the most trouble. Although Hanks’s production company, Playtone, paid \$1.1 million for the rights to *Charlie Wilson’s War*, speculation is the title role will go to someone other than Hanks. Charlie’s friends say it only makes sense; even in Hanks’s most charged moments on-screen, his language has never approached the shades of blue that perpetually color Charlie’s. Hanks is said to favor John Corbett, the dreamy but insufficiently Greek bridegroom in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Charlie has no opinion on Corbett, but he did enjoy having lunch in D.C. late last year with Corbett’s girlfriend, Bo Derek. “You know, Bo still looks exactly like she did in *10*,” says Charlie.

Therein lies the pitfall of the gains Charlie has made. The perks of his new life—the TV appearances, the adoring fans at the book fairs, the meetings with Hanks, the lunches with starlets—make all his old vices that much more available. It’s like beating the bottle and being rewarded with a bar. But Charlie’s having too much fun taking his hero’s ride into the sunset, his pretty bride by his side, to mess it up now. He enjoys being a hero, but he knows he’ll always be a scoundrel. Make that a recovering scoundrel.

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