

Futile, fraudulent or worse

Imperial Life in the Emerald City by Rajiv Chandrasekaran and The Occupation of Iraq by Ali A Allawi are two very different books on Iraq that point to the same grim conclusion, writes Oliver Miles

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Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad's Green Zone

by Rajiv Chandrasekaran
356pp, Bloomsbury, £12.99

The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace

by Ali A Allawi
518pp, Yale, £18.99

The Iraq war has produced a cupboardful of books and these two have both been in the news. Rajiv Chandrasekaran is on the shortlist for the £30,000 Samuel Johnson prize for non-fiction, the winner of which is announced on Monday. Ali Allawi, an Iraqi minister from 2003 to 2006, has made a high-profile appeal for a U-turn in US policy and the creation of an international body to supervise American withdrawal.

Chandrasekaran's book is not about Iraq, but about the Americans in the fortified Green Zone, Little America on the Tigris, where work is sitting at a computer entering "raw data", recreation is Bible class and one of the few reminders of the "Red Zone" (the rest of the world) is a sign in the dry-cleaning service reminding patrons to remove ammunition from pockets. Non-Americans get just an occasional mention, for example the Brits who are envied because they have Ikea furniture rather than plastic stuff from Halliburton.

As a journalist with experience in Baghdad and Cairo, Chandrasekaran knows well that the Green Zone is a bubble. His quotation from TE Lawrence is apposite: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands ... It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is."

Don't expect to deepen your knowledge of Iraq. Chandrasekaran knows his stuff, but this is Iraq lite. Important insights such as the loyalty problem - the Americans misunderstood us; we will fight for Iraq; we will not fight for them - are used merely to introduce American stories, such as a thrilling tale about a patrol getting into a firefight.

Portraits of leading American players are full and mainly sympathetic. Paul Bremer, for example, the viceroy in tan boots, gets a whole chapter, which brings him to life as a human being, though Chandrasekaran's verdict is that he is a control freak. But he ruthlessly demolishes Americans - he names names and exposes corruption and fraud - whose only qualification was party loyalty.

The wretched failure to plan for the after-war period is exposed. The planning office run by Douglas Feith, Donald Rumsfeld's deputy in the Pentagon, was so secret that none of its plans reached Baghdad. Comprehensive State Department plans were binned on instructions from Rumsfeld and Cheney (no doubt any contribution from Whitehall went the same way).

There was a cult of ignorance. Anyone with experience was suspected of believing that "democracy wouldn't work in the Arab world". Being a Democrat in the Green Zone was like

"being gay in a small town". The professor appointed to rebuild Iraqi higher education read no books about Iraq: "I'd much rather learn first-hand than have it filtered to me by an author." The US performance in one key sector after another - police, industry, economic reform, media, power generation - is shown in a series of farcical scenes to have been amateurish, futile, fraudulent or worse.

Allawi is an Iraqi Shia, closely related to two major players in the story: he is the cousin of interim PM Ayad Allawi and nephew of sometime Pentagon favourite Ahmad Chalabi. For more than half his life he has been an exile. Compared with that of many others, his life in exile was comfortable, but he exposes the melancholy obsessions, the ambivalence and dislocation of an exile's life. He arrived in Iraq six months after the invasion in 2003, and takes the story almost to the end of 2006.

The historical introduction takes nothing for granted, explaining, for example, the contrast between urban and desert values, the origins of the Shia, and the evolution of the Sunni/Shia divide. Allawi blames the Wahhabis for inflaming relations between the two (showing, perhaps, some rare personal bias). Individuals such as Chalabi and institutions such as the Sciri political party are briefly but fairly introduced, and there are useful lists of the main players, with a glossary of Arabic terms. There is a fascinating analysis of the enigmatic Ayatollah Sistani, whose views were crudely transposed by the Americans into inappropriate language about "separation of mosque and state".

Allawi, a former senior associate member at St Antony's College, Oxford, has the British contribution to the invasion in perspective. Tony Blair "saw himself as a bridle to Bush's wild horse" but was simply dragged along behind the horse. The Foreign Office saw through the rosy prognoses about Iraq after Saddam, but it was a long time before they felt able to challenge US thinking. A possible example, not previously claimed to my knowledge, is that Blair was urging Bush in early April 2004 to abort the offensive in Fallujah. I should declare my interest as one of the 52 retired ambassadors who wrote to Blair later that month pressing him to exert his influence in Washington as a loyal ally and not to support policies that were doomed to failure. He did not reply to our letter.

The narrative brings to life the dramatic events that followed the invasion. The brief period under Jay Garner is dismissed by the senior British official in Baghdad as "an unbelievable mess". Ahmad Chalabi and others groomed by the Pentagon and the vice-president's office are about to be parachuted into government, and are "flabbergasted" when Paul Bremer is appointed boss instead. The change of plan, favoured by Colin Powell and the CIA, is surprisingly attributed by Allawi to the influence of Blair. He comments tartly that Bremer, not in the first division of American career diplomats, seems to have been chosen precisely because of his lack of prior involvement in Iraq.

Allawi has a gift for quotation. It is sharp to recall the fatuous comment by Paul Wolfowitz, testifying to Congress in 2003, that Iraqi oil revenue "could bring between \$50bn and \$100bn over the course of the next two or three years ... We are dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction and relatively soon".

Equally striking is General Petraeus, now promoted to command the US forces in Iraq, "waxing lyrical" about the rapid equipping of the new Iraqi army at a time when something between \$1.3bn and \$2.3bn was being stolen from the defence budget, possibly the largest robbery in history, according to an Iraqi judge. The equipment the army got included 30-year-old helicopters that would scarcely fly, bullet-proof vests that fell apart and toy-store-quality helmets.

The Occupation of Iraq is a personal testimony. Allawi's criticisms are the more striking because he was not an outright opponent of the war, and certainly no supporter of the insurgency. His book is not without blemishes, but it should be read by everyone who wants to understand this sad affair.

- Oliver Miles is a former British ambassador to Libya, Luxembourg and Greece