

Commentary: Ali Allawi and his neocon exploiters

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NEW YORK -- American neoconservatives, especially those recent converts from the left who applauded the Iraq invasion, are desperately dancing back from the abyss. Their op-ed pieces all begin with "I supported the war, but ... "

However, excuses along the lines of, "I only wanted what was best for the Iraqis," are getting harder to swallow. Today, we simply know too much about the doctoring of pre-war intelligence, US complicity in Saddam Hussein's crippling 1980s war against Iran, and the UN's civilian-targeted sanctions of the 1990s.

Nonetheless, the most convenient fig leaf of all has now come along, which many on the right are reaching for - indeed, almost fighting over - in order to cover their own backsides. The trouble is, however, this fig leaf, offered by a secular Iraqi Shiite who has largely kept his hands clean in the post-invasion years, is not what it appears to the neocons.

Ali Allawi's new book, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, is being exploited by George W. Bush cheerleaders who, before the invasion, gave the US president much-needed camouflage among pro-war liberals.

In recent reviews, Fouad Ajami and Christopher Hitchens, who still only criticize how the war was fought, but not why, both use Allawi's moral authority as a bomb-dodging apolitical technocrat to paper over the immorality of their own Green Zone-bound neo-imperialism.

A closer reading of what Allawi has, in fact, written, and how Ajami and Hitchens choose to misread it, is in order. In the book's epilogue, Allawi mentions the "apologists for the war [who] scuttled for cover" after things went wrong. Little did he know that such a cover would be provided by his own book.

Allawi's focus is both broad and deep, but what makes it most valuable is that it is an Iraqi focus. Most importantly, he sees the invasion as a "great strategic blunder" and not, as his two reviewers would have it, as a series of still-fixable, always-forgivable, tactical errors. He writes that the 2003 invaders found - contrary to all neocon hopes and promises - "no public cheers for democracy, no indication that this was a people hungering for the freedoms and liberties of the West," but rather, a "popular religiosity" that was anti-Israel, anti-West and, in the bewildered eyes of the many neocons who hoped otherwise, deeply anti-modern.

As *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd - whom Hitchens gratuitously insults in his review - wrote in a loose quotation from Donald Rumsfeld, "You invade the country you have, not the country you have imagined." Allawi said it even better: by promoting a secular brand of politics in Iraq, he "missed the zeitgeist." No need for an Arabic dictionary here, "zeitgeist" is German for "a spirit or outlook characteristic of a period or generation."

"The insurgency was not inevitable by any means," writes Allawi elsewhere, adding that "there is no reason it could not have been contained at its inception." But not "contained" in the way the profoundly anti-Sunni Ajami chooses to misinterpret Allawi's post-facto prescription, i.e. by sufficiently "punishing" the Sunnis.

Unlike so many neocons who blame firstly Saddam, secondly the Sunnis, and thirdly all Iraqis themselves for the country's present mayhem, Allawi points a finger at the "terrible passions unleashed by invasion and occupation." There. He said it: the cost and consequences of the US invasion and occupation were the architects of Iraq's endless bloodshed.

After honestly trying his best and risking his life, Allawi, in the blunt words of his preface, has clearly given up: "the rot in the 'new' Iraq had set too deep to allow any hope" in the political process. Nonetheless, Ajami's review inexplicably hears in this despair a "shadow of hope, an echo of deliverance, of men and women released from a terrible captivity." No cost is too great for Ajami to see Saddam hang.

Ajami, an unrepentant supporter of Ahmed Chalabi and merciless critic of, as he terms it, the pro-Sunni US State Department for not buying his friend's pre-invasion lies, scorns the "spurious authority" of every US-authored book on the war, no doubt because they have been universally critical of it. In Allawi, Ajami seeks a savior for his own war rationale that is now sinking fast.

Meanwhile, Hitchens, misconstruing Allawi's main point about America's knowing mistakes, allows himself to agree that the US is, instead, guilty of "general innocence" and "great presumption" - Ajami holds Bush responsible only for "excessive optimism." Yet, Hitchens' dissimulating review, unlike Allawi's no-holds-barred indictment of US stupidity verging on malfeasance, makes no mention of Bush policies encouraging Abu Ghraib, flaunting the UN charter, and unleashing heavy weapons and midnight raids on family homes.

Hitchens exploits Allawi's unarguable point that, throughout the 1990s, Saddam had brutalized Iraqi society to the point of collapse, so as to claim that violence and civil war were, therefore, inevitable post-Saddam outcomes and, thus, not attributable to anything George W. Bush did upon entering the White House in January 2001, with his hidden agenda for Iraq.

Hitchens writes, "canceling or postponing an intervention would only have meant having to act later on, in conditions even more awful and dangerous." Yet, he then continues - in what could almost serve as an epigram for both his and Ajami's willfully self-serving reviews - to say: "whether Allawi agrees with this, I could not say."

You can be certain that Allawi agrees with very little of what Hitchens and Ajami have to say about his book.

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