

# A Hell of a Country ALI ALLAWI'S NEW

## MEMOIR SHOWS IRAQ'S COLLAPSE WAS INEVITABLE.

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Ali Allawi's memoir *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing*

*the Peace* certainly deserves the praise and attention it has been getting (even from writers like Maureen Dowd, so eager to score cheap points against the Bush administration that—even while rebuking others for having insufficient grasp of Iraqi reality—she *confused* the author with his cousin *Iyad Allawi* and called him a "puppet" into the bargain). The book is written with a very strong combination of heart and mind by someone with an enviable command of English who both knows and cares a good deal about Iraq. He does not make too much of the fact, but having been both a minister of defense and a minister of finance since the fall of Saddam Hussein, as well as serving as a member of the National Assembly, he must have risked his own life more times in the past four years than many professional soldiers have to do in a lifetime. (We have a tendency to forget this, of the Iraqis who step forward as volunteers for the rescue of their shattered country.)

We can probably stipulate that Allawi's criticisms of U.S. policy in Iraq—from general innocence about conditions in the country to great presumption about the measures needed to redeem it—have been sufficiently borne out by other witnesses for them to be accepted as generally true. But this now-common view sometimes comes with a corollary that I think Allawi does not share. Reading about the murder of more than 100 Iraqis last week, I was barely even annoyed when I saw the headline that an anti-war Web site put on it: *Dozens more die in Bush's war* was the general thrust of the thing. It was as if al-Qaida had played only a walk-on part in its own atrocities. We are sometimes told in weirdly neutral tones that the attendant sectarian mayhem has been "unleashed" or even "fueled" by the arrival of the coalition, terminology that has the same exculpatory effect. But Allawi's work is impatient with rhetoric of this kind, or perhaps I should say incompatible with it. He states plainly that:

When the Coalition arrived in Baghdad on 9 April, 2003, it found a fractured and brutalized society, presided over by a fearful, heavily armed minority. The post-9/11 *jihadi* culture that was subsequently to plague Iraq was just beginning to take root. The institutions of the state were moribund; the state exhausted. The ideology that had held Ba'athist rule together had decayed beyond repair.

I pause to make two points. First, it's a pleasure to see someone use the word *brutalized* correctly, to mean not so much the experience of being maltreated as the familiarity with being brutal. Second, if what Allawi says is true, then Iraq was headed straight for implosion and failure, both as a state *and* a society, well before 2003. Not only this, but its Sunni ruling elite was flirting increasingly with a [Salafist](#) ideology. In such circumstances—as many Iraqi dissidents argued even at the time—the United States had to face the alarming fact that a ruined Iraq was in its future whether it intervened or not.

How had a country that was bursting with oil wealth and development in the 1970s become a sweltering, violent basket case? Because the historic compromise between Sunni and Shiite, uneasy as it was, had been ripped apart by dictatorship and overseas aggression. As Allawi phrases it:

The state removed the elements that kept a vigorous Shi'a identity alive in parallel to a Sunni-dominated state. Nationalizations, emigration and expulsions destroyed the Shi'a mercantilist class; the state monopoly on education, publishing and the media removed the cultural underpinnings of Shi'a life. ... When the state embarked on the mass killings after the 1991 uprisings, Iraq became hopelessly compromised in the minds of most Shi'a.

And this is to say nothing of the Kurds: the one-fifth of Iraqi society who, as Allawi points out, had *already left* the Iraqi state by the time the coalition arrived. Without needing or wishing to soften any critique of post-invasion planning, I would propose that this analysis has a highly unsettling implication. Hell was coming to Iraq no matter what.

This point is undergirded by another one, which is that hell was already making considerable strides in Iraq in the decade before 2003. Again, Allawi's cool analysis and careful evidence darkens this already black picture. All the crucial indices, from illiteracy to unemployment to the emigration of talent and skill, were rapidly heading south. Perhaps most ominously, the reaction of Saddam Hussein was to ratchet up religious and theocratic rhetoric and policy, broadcasting for jihad 'round the clock, engaging in a massive mosque-building program, and launching sporadic "morals" campaigns. Again, U.S. policy could hardly be indifferent to this distress and misery and demagoguery, if only because the whole context was shaped by two largely American decisions. The first was to allow Saddam to remain in power after 1991 and to watch while he massacred the Shiites and Kurds, an action that Allawi rightly describes as "unforgivable." The second was to impose sanctions, which, unduly prolonged, did far more damage to an already distraught society than they did to the ruthless and corrupt regime.

I think I could pass an examination in the failures of our post-2003 policy and even add a few observations from experience. But I have never been able to overcome the feeling that Iraq was our ward and responsibility one way or another, and that canceling or postponing an intervention would only have meant having to act later on, in conditions even more awful and dangerous than the ones with which we have

become familiar. Whether Ali Allawi now agrees with this I could not say, but his excellent and lucid book makes it a case that is extremely difficult to dispute