

The occupation of Iraq

It might have been otherwise

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The lament of an Iraqi politician who supported the war



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IF LIBERATING a nation from an egregious dictatorship had been the initial impulse behind the invasion of Iraq, it might have been a "just war". Instead, writes Ali Allawi in the poignant closing pages of this book, when Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction failed to materialise, other justifications became necessary. Freedom was an afterthought.

No one had wanted to believe in the justice of the enterprise, and in its ultimate success, more fervently than Mr Allawi. He had watched, from exile, his compatriots suffer. He had worked with the diverse, fractious Iraqi opposition. He was a true believer. Then, after the regime was toppled and he became defence, then finance, minister in successive post-Saddam governments, he had an inside seat as the whole thing unravelled.

Others have chronicled what went wrong. Few have witnessed events so close up, and with so intimate a knowledge of the gap between (Iraqi) reality and (American) expectation. "The entire process of planning for a post-war Iraq", he writes, "was mired in ineptitude, poor organisation and indifference." The first post-Saddam administration, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under Paul Bremer, became trapped in "blindly optimistic" group-think. It was reluctant to call the insurgency by its name; it squandered reconstruction money; it addressed the Iraqi public with "alien rhetoric". Mr Bremer himself displayed "distaste, bordering on contempt" for some of the figures in the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), the body he set up to put an Iraqi face on the occupation. Not surprisingly, the CPA and the IGC viewed one another with mistrust and not a little incomprehension.

Most of this critique is familiar enough. What sets it apart is Mr Allawi's angle of vision, as a thoughtful Shia Muslim intellectual, loyal to his community but determined to be fair-minded.

It has become commonplace, for example, to say that the Americans were woefully ignorant of Iraq's turbulent history and tangled sociology. Mr Allawi goes much further, arguing persuasively that they fundamentally misread Iraq's political culture. They simultaneously overrated the power of its secular middle class and underestimated the attachment of the majority Shias to their faith and to their religious leaders. The idea that the mass of Iraqi Shias would be willing accomplices in their country's makeover into a secular, liberal democracy—which America's neo-conservatives clung to as an article of faith—was absurd.

This fundamental error led to others. There was the naive belief that Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most senior Shia cleric, favoured the separation of mosque and state when, in fact, it was he more than anyone else who was to secure the electoral triumph of the Shia Islamists. And the young firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr was written off as a street thug rather than the leader of a loose-knit but significant grassroots movement among the Shia poor.

Mr Allawi does not spare the occupiers. For him, the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad became over time the symbol of all that had gone wrong since the invasion: an air-conditioned bubble in which a ruling elite wrapped itself, wholly out of touch with the chaotic, violent world of ordinary Iraqis outside.

But he does not spare his fellow Iraqi politicians either. The new political class has presided over an "explosion in corrupt practices, bordering on the open plunder of the state's resources". Mr Allawi, who is in a position to know, narrates in depressing detail how millions of dollars of the defence-procurement budget were spirited out of the country during the interim government of his cousin, Iyad Allawi. He implies that several heads should have rolled; none did. Lacking any coherent vision for the new Iraq, an often corrupt and incompetent coterie perpetuated many of the mistakes of Mr Bremer's CPA, compounding them with new ones of their own.

Mr Allawi is as impartial as it is possible for someone in his position to be (no longer a government minister, he is an adviser to the current prime minister). But he does have opinions. Some may think him too harsh on Iyad Allawi, whose interim government he clearly sees as an unnecessary way-station on the road to Shia empowerment, and too indulgent towards his colleague Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi politician who more than any other seduced policy wonks in Washington into believing that Iraq would be easy. Mr Allawi is a moderate but, unlike Mr Chalabi, he is no secularist. A devout man, he is sympathetic to Shia Islamism, though by no means blind to its excesses. He acknowledges that Iran is stirring the Iraqi pot but has no time for the shriller forms of Iran-bashing.

One can dissent from one or other of these positions. But the thing about Mr Allawi is that reasonableness keeps breaking through. "It might have been otherwise," he laments, more in sorrow than in anger, as he reflects on the whole sorry saga. Might it? People such as Mr Allawi, who put their faith in the invasion of Iraq, are entitled to feel betrayed.

