

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Deeper view of Iraq's poisoned well

So far, most books about the calamitous US incursion into Iraq have been written by Americans or Brits. Now, at last, we have an Iraqi view of the invasion, written by a highly intelligent and unusually dispassionate insider.

Investment banker and Oxford academic Ali Allawi, currently senior adviser to the Iraqi prime minister, returned to his homeland after years of exile to serve consecutively as minister of trade, defence and finance in the post-Saddam government. Widely respected for his integrity, Allawi became so disillusioned by the inefficiency, incompetence and corruption of the new American-imposed order in Iraq that he declined the offer of an ambassadorship to Washington, retired from politics in May 2006 and once again left the country.

Since then his time has been spent writing a comprehensive account of the occupation, from the perspective of one close to the centres of power and equally familiar with the ways of Islam and the West. His hope is that a better informed public might put more pressure on politicians to put things right in Iraq. The result is a finely textured book that has instantly become the benchmark against which all future studies of the Iraqi conflict will be measured.

If Allawi is critical of his fellow Iraqis, he is simply seething about official Washington's "monumental" ignorance about the pre-war situation in Iraq after decades of dictatorship. None of the proponents of the war, including the neo-conservatives, he says, had the faintest idea of the country they were about to occupy.

"Shrewder and/or more perceptive people knew instinctively that the invasion of Iraq would open up great fissures in Iraqi society, with enormous regional and international consequences."

Allawi is particularly good at demystifying some of the complexities of Iraq, "one of the most invaded and violated territories in the history of the world". The prism through which he views his country and people is

the work of the controversial Iraqi scholar Ali Al Wardi, whose major insight was that a pervasive dichotomy exists between the civilised values of city dwellers and the tribal values of

the desert. Al Wardi insisted that the process of modernisation and industrialisation in Iraq was only skin deep and that tribal values, born out of the harshness of the desert environment, held sway.

Across this city/desert divide lie the religious differences between the Shia (urban southerners) and the Sunni (nomadic, tribal north-easterners). The majority Shia, who suffered horrendously at the hands of Saddam's Ba'athists, are determined not to let the new Iraq slip out of their hands; the Sunni, for their part, appalled by an invasion that has put an end to their hopes of power, have declared war on the new order.

Throw in the fiercely independent Kurds and any number of Islamic jihadists flocking into the country to hit back at the infidel and you have a witches' brew that is now poisoning wells throughout the Middle East as well as in America.

The law of unintended consequences, Allawi concludes, has broken out with a vengeance in Iraq. Far from establishing a model of democracy in the Middle East, as Paul Wolfowitz and others intended, the occupation of Iraq has injected an unknown element into a regional system that can barely acknowledge pluralism and democracy, let alone accept a Shia-dominated Iraq. Even worse, the chief beneficiary of the Bush administration's meddling is a member of the "axis of evil" — a potentially nuclear-armed Iran.

For the general reader, there is probably too much detail in Allawi's meticulous and comprehensive study. But anyone wishing to understand fully the causes and effects of the American misadventure in Iraq need look no further than this exceptional book. **Richard Steyn**

THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ - Winning the War, Losing the Peace

By Ali A Allawi
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