

Useful idiot

The Unravelling:

High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq

Emma Sky

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Deferred armies often console themselves by constructing a 'stab in the back' myth. The war was going well, victory was in sight, but the politicians back home let the troops down. Most famously, the German Army responded to its defeat in the First World War with such a myth. More recently we have seen such responses to both the British debacle in Aden and the considerably more momentous US defeat in Vietnam. And today such a myth is already under construction with regard to the Iraq War.

So much was only to be expected; what is surprising is that leading the way in the myth-making is Emma Sky, a British woman, who, in this generally acclaimed memoir of the Occupation, goes out of the way to proclaim her opposition to the first Gulf War (she demonstrated against the war and actually offered herself as a human shield!), her impressive humanitarian credentials, and how she considered Bush's invasion a serious mistake for which she felt obliged to apologise personally to the Iraqi people.

How did such an unlikely person go on to become an apologist for and servant of US militarism? She volunteered to serve in occupied Iraq, first of all working for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Kirkuk and later becoming political adviser to the US General Ray Odierno (one of those to whom she dedicates her memoir). Her intention in going down this road was, as she puts it, 'to apologise to Iraqis for the war and to help them rebuild their country'.

She is very much aware of the incongruity of her position and recognises that working for the Occupation changed her. How does she deal with this? The narrative device she

employs is to make a joke of it. When Tony Blair visited the country in May 2007, she was invited to meet him at the British Embassy. The Embassy was 'rocketed....minutes before Blair arrived – he was running ten minutes late. Two vehicles were destroyed'. She was introduced to him by US General Petraeus as 'a national treasure' and he was astonished to discover that this trusted adviser to the US military was in fact British. When he asked her how she came to be working for the Americans, she replied 'Stockholm syndrome'. Unfortunately their conversation was curtailed by a renewal of the insurgent attack with Blair being taken off 'to the safe room....We heard a thud – the rocket landed close by'.

One is tempted to say that she had gone 'native'; but she had, of course, gone 'colonialist'. On occasion she was described by the Americans as their 'Miss Bell', after Gertrude Bell, who had advised the British during their post-WW1 military occupation of Iraq. She finds this quite flattering and one chapter is actually entitled 'Our Miss Bell'.

She had come to apologise to the Iraqi people for the invasion and now 'I was sitting like some colonial administrator in the office that before the war had served as the governor of Kirkuk....There were lines of Iraqis waiting to see me'. Inevitably, despite the best will in the world, far from apologising to the Iraqis, in the best colonialist tradition, she finds them annoyingly ungrateful:

'Iraqis often failed to acknowledge what we had done for them and consistently complained. (I was sometimes reminded of the sketch from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* when the People's Front of Judea asks, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" before acknowledging a litany of accomplishments that would have been familiar to anyone who had been serving in Iraq: "The aqueduct, sanitation, the roads, education.")'

Considering the damage done to the country by sanctions, invasion and occupation, this verges on the obscene.

Her stance is perhaps best laid bare in another jokey episode where she describes how she advised the British General Graeme Lamb to remove the Union Jack from the

cover of a strategy document and a tongue-in-cheek exchange followed. He accused her of 'having spent too long in the company of Americans' and reminded her that the Union Jack had flown 'over an Empire on which the sun never set etc., etc.'. She replied: 'I know it may be hard for you to come to terms with, but Great Britain has lost Her Empire (as well as the Great) some years ago. These days we have to be more skilled and subtle, and rule indirectly through our cousins. We should therefore embrace the Stars and Stripes as our own'. Joking aside, this does indeed seem to be the rationale behind her decision to work for the US military. Lamb, one of the very few British senior officers that the Americans had any time for (he was one of the architects of the 'Sunni Awakening'), duly removed the flag.

She insists that in Iraq she was 'an internationalist, who was dedicated to fighting injustice and promoting peace'. Quite perversely she convinced herself that the US military was the vehicle for the realisation of these objectives. The United States was the most powerful country in the world and so if any progress towards justice and peace was going to be achieved it would have to be through the agency of the United States and its interventionist arm, the US Army. She is not uncritical of the US military, far from it! She was one of the CPA officials who visited Abu Ghraib after 'the revelations that US forces had been torturing detainees'. She records her astonishment that 'even interrogation was contracted out'. The place 'exuded evil'. She describes how US vehicles carried placards that read 'STAY BACK FIFTY METERS OR YOU WILL BE SHOT', which could only be read twenty metres away. And on one occasion, she queried a report that five enemy had been killed in Diyala including an 'IED emplacer'. Who, General Odierno asked, were the others? He was told 'Four children, sir, who were in the vicinity'. 'How many more enemies had we created?', she asks.

She is engaged in the most monumental self-delusion, playing the traditional role of the 'useful idiot', a decent person defending the indefensible.

Nevertheless, the war was being won, she assures us.

The US Surge and the Sunni Awakening had turned the tide. 'The new religion was Counter Insurgency, which we called COIN', she tells us. But it was all thrown away by the incoming Obama administration, which was determined to get out of Iraq regardless of the consequences. She singles out Vice President Joe Biden and the new US Ambassador Chris Hill as the men most responsible for pushing this policy, handing the country over to Nuri al-Maliki. Her hostility was reciprocated with one of Hill's staff describing her as a 'goddam fucking British spy'. For the US military, 'the greatest threat to the mission had become the US embassy'.

Her identification with the US military was complete. They had success in their grasp, but cowardly politicians snatched it away: 'Washington...had betrayed the very principles the US military believed it was fighting to uphold'. There is a certain irony in the fact that it is not the Bush administration that bears the brunt of her criticism after all the suffering the war and occupation had inflicted on the Iraqi people, but the Obama administration for bringing it to an end!

She has not returned to Britain now that the Occupation is over, keen to resume her humanitarian work, but has instead become a part of the military-industrial-academic complex with the Directorship of the Yale University World Fellows programme and a Senior Fellowship at the University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. Other Senior Fellows at the Institute include General Graeme Lamb, the US General Stanley McChrystal and Robert James Woolsey, a former Director of the CIA.

John Newsinger

A new, revised and expanded edition of Newsinger's British Counterinsurgency is out in October, published by Palgrave.