

Hitchens, Christopher. *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq*. New York: Plume/Penguin, 2003.

Christopher Hitchens's *A Long Short War (ALSW)* is a chronicle and justification of "Operation Iraqi Freedom," consisting of twenty-four brief essays written (mostly) for the online magazine *Slate* between November 2002 and April 2003. The idea behind the book, Hitchens writes in the Preface, "was to test short-term analyses against longer-term ones, while simultaneously subjecting long-term positions or convictions to shorter-term challenges" (v).

By the time this little book is in anybody's hands, there will have been more developments, forbidding as well as encouraging. One cannot hope to write as a historian about the present, but one can hope to contest, as an essayist, the dishonest, ahistorical view that some events or tendencies that followed the intervention would otherwise never have occurred. "In dreams begin responsibilities," and those who kept alive the dream of a free Iraq must accept the responsibility of the logical and probable consequences of their demands (v-vi).

Having set this rather severe standard for himself, Hitchens brings a characteristic ferocity and rigor to the task of delivering on it—managing, in about a hundred breezy pages, to rebut virtually every argument against the war, assemble the arguments for it, and raise some interesting philosophical questions along the way.

More nonsense has been written about the Iraq war than on almost any subject since the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, and it's merely stating a fact that the bulk of this nonsense has come from the Left, even when the Left's lapdogs on the Right have slurped it up and regurgitated it. Self-contradiction, defamation, disinformation and evasion: seek and ye shall find it all in the pages of Cairo's *Al Ahrām Weekly*, *Counterpunch*, *The Nation*, or for that matter the pages of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Never have so many obscured so much by saying so little—and by saying it so badly. Hitchens, no stranger to polemical dust-ups, lets loose here with an impressive barrage of munitions, hitting the right targets without much collateral damage.

The Introduction, written on the eve of the war (March 18, 2003) is practically worth the price of the book in this respect, compressing into sixteen pages a deft riposte to virtually every anti-war cliché or slogan you've heard in the last year or so. I, for one, would like to hear those who condemn the war on behalf of "the Arab world" deal intelligently with widespread Iraqi-American support for it (1-3). And it would be interesting to hear the "Israel-is-behind-everything" conspiracy-mongers confront Hitchens's terse annihilation of their insinuations (6-7). "It's that Straussian-Jewish neo-conservative cabal that's

hijacked U.S. policy,” we’re told. How that accounts for the support of a nominally Jewish Marxist like Hitchens is anybody’s guess, not that it does very much to explain why the Straussian-Jewish neo-conservative Paul Wolfowitz took a stubbornly anti-Saddam line right through the Reagan Administration (2, 17-18), when Jewish neo-conservatives like Daniel Pipes were counseling a tilt *toward* Saddam, and big-name Straussians (Bloom, Jaffa, Pangle, etc.) were obsessively focused not on Baghdad, but on “the closing of the American mind.” “We have to give the inspectors more time.” And how much more time would be sufficient—another twelve years, say, with a four-year vacation stuck in the middle of it? Or how about just waiting until May 2003, when Iraq had had “enough time” to assume chairmanship of the U.N. Committee on Disarmament (10)? “But Saddam can be deterred.” Aha—so *that* must be why he responded to our dire military threats by blowing up the Kuwaiti oilfields (9)....

Hitchens is the master of the thought-provoking one-liner, but one of them really ought to take the prize both for audacity and insight. “Four million Iraqis,” he writes, “have been forced to take their talents overseas and live in exile. They should have the right of return” (15). This little jab, as subtle as it is powerful, could use a bit of elaboration.

Recall that partisans of the Palestinian cause insist on their “right of return” while being among the most vocal and vehement opponents of the war on Iraq. Recall also that they never tire of “linking” the issue of Palestinian rights with their anti-war stance. Bearing this and Hitchens’s one-liner in mind, one begins to wonder a bit about cognitive dissonance and unasked questions: Why, for instance, do Palestinians have a right of return but not Iraqis? If the 1948 Arab invasion of Israel was an act of “liberation” (a widespread assumption among hard-core partisans of the Palestinian cause), why was the 2003 invasion of Iraq a “crime against humanity” (another assumption, widespread among the same people)? Putting the same point another way: why was it *just* to wage the 1948 war in *violation* of the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine, but *unjust* to wage the 2003 war to *enforce* a series of UN Resolutions stretching from 1991 to 2002? It’s “all history,” I know, but what *isn’t* in the Middle East?

Anyway, don’t wait too long for an answer to such questions from International ANSWER, the Palestine Solidarity Committee, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the Edward Said Fanclub, or any of the periodicals operating out of Cairo, Beirut, Amman, or Karachi. Just compare the moral posturing of such sources with their capacities for consistency, and you begin to see the value of that one little sentence, and of a dozen others like it throughout the book.

I’ll mention without belaboring some of the other polemical triumphs of *ALSW*, many them focused on the Left’s propensity for specifically lexicographical obscurantism. “Most of *Long Short War* is given over to parsing words,” writes one of Hitchens’s critics with no small insinuation of contempt.

Indeed it is, and in ways that don't exactly flatter those who use words without being able to "parse" or define them. A fair bit of Left discourse proceeds by the mindless repetition of mantras based on undefined and indefinable terms—"anti-concepts" as Ayn Rand described them—which, while denoting nothing in particular, gradually come to shock and awe the careless, the craven, and the gullible. It takes a certain self-consciousness and self-confidence to see through the semantic confidence games here (intelligence helps, too) and more often than not, Hitchens has what it takes to do the job. His essays on "multilateralism and unilateralism" (34-36), "evil" (40-42), Bush as "cowboy" (57-59), the "drumbeat to war" (69-72), and the "no war for oil" mantra (85-88) are venomously astute.

My favorite of these word-parsings is "Inspecting 'Inspections'" (66-68), which makes the crucial point that by the UN's definition of that term, inspections place the burden of proof

squarely on Iraq to prove that it has complied. There is no mention in the resolution [i.e., UN Resolution 1441] of any requirement for the international community to furnish more evidence. Inspection is the term of art employed to describe the monitoring of compliance, not the unearthing of empirical proofs. As it happens, more empirical proofs have been unearthed, but no *investigation*, in the strict sense has been carried out. If the United Nations was to call for an investigation of Iraq's arsenal, complete with inventory and accounting, it would logically have to call for the dispatch of armed peacekeepers, at the very least, in order to ensure access. Such a job could never be carried out by a small posse of civilians. And given the square mileage of Iraq, the number of those armed peacekeepers would have to be pretty high. This would not be an invasion by most definitions, but it would very much resemble an occupation (67, his emphasis).

Keep this passage in mind for the next time you confront some jeering ignoramus who tells you that the war was all a fraud because "no weapons have been found." Actually, what's fraudulent is precisely that claim. This, too, could use some unpacking, as most of the relevant history seems to have been lost to the memory hole.

The truth is that Iraq has a uniquely sordid history of using chemical weapons against civilians, having racked up a casualty count in the tens of thousands during the 1980s in its various crusades to annihilate Saddam's ethnic enemies, the Kurds and the Iranians. By invading Kuwait in 1990 but losing the subsequent war, Iraq incurred the obligation via UN Resolution 687 (1991) of divesting itself of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD), incurring in the same resolution the burden of *proving* its compliance. To say that it *failed* to do so is a monumental understatement: for more than a decade, it thwarted every effort at

disarmament—lying, concealing, spying, bribing, and intimidating its way past UN inspectors until in 1998 it finally just expelled them for their pains (see Richard Butler, *The Greatest Threat: Iraq, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Growing Crisis of Global Security*, [New York: Public Affairs Press, 2000]). Worse yet, it succeeded twice at wrangling “verification” from those inspectors on blatantly false pretenses, only to be caught red-handed a bit later: first in the 1980s when it got its nuclear program past Hans Blix, then in the 1990s when it got a clean bill of health from the United Nations Special Commission on Disarmament (UNSCOM). Given a “final chance” to comply via UN Resolution 1441 in November 2002, it failed yet again by issuing a fraudulent “declaration” of its weapons programs to UN inspectors on December 7 of that year. Despite all that, the inspectors nonetheless found numerous weapons violations a few weeks later anyway—i.e., the “empirical proofs” to which Hitchens alludes in the preceding passage (for the fraudulence of Iraqi declarations, see *UNMOVIC Twelfth Quarterly Report* [Feb. 2003], paragraphs 6-11, 38; for weapons violations, see paragraphs 15, 30-34, and 40-45; for Iraq’s non-cooperation on substance, see paragraph 73).

No one has yet *demonstrated* Iraq’s compliance with its disarmament obligations, nor has anyone ever accounted for its missing weapons stocks, much less disputed that they *are* missing. Nor has anyone conclusively explained why a nation under sanctions for failing to comply with its disarmament obligations was for twelve years incapable of documenting its supposed compliance after claiming to comply. And yet somehow, in a truly Orwellian inversion, the burden for finding Iraqi WMDs has become ours, not Iraq’s, to discharge.

As for the rules of evidence in this game, the discovery of open Iraqi weapons violations (January-Feb. 2003), hidden gas centrifuges (June 2003), weapons blueprints (June), a vial of toxin (September), admissions of complicity in proscribed programs and concealment activities (September) are all deemed by “critics” to be insufficient reason for worry. Nor is Iraq’s past involvement in WMD use, production or concealment deemed relevant to how we view such evidence as we have. The suggestion seems to be that in order for a genuine threat to exist, the threat must in some undefined sense be “imminent”—meaning, I suppose, that no *real* threat can be said to exist until we can verify with Cartesian certainty that catastrophe from the source of the threat is just around the corner. Alternatively, the idea seems to be that there’s no point in looking very hard for Iraqi weapons unless we can absolutely certify their existence *before* starting to look for them, a conception of inquiry that gives new meaning to Meno’s paradox (and from which it evidently follows that if you don’t immediately find them, you should immediately stop looking). Whatever the interpretation, the bottom line here seems to be that a nation or organization now has a foolproof strategy for acquiring WMDs: *count on the epistemology of mass evasion*. In other words, if you conceal your weapons long enough and well

enough, it will take even the most determined and expert investigator years to figure out what you've done; since world opinion is too addicted to instant gratification to wait for the results of such an investigation, you can always make an ally of its impatience, ignorance, and plain old stupidity to win the WMD game. Of all of the journalistic writing I've done on the WMD issue, Hitchens's essays are virtually alone in addressing the essential issues here alongside those of Rolf Ekeus, Charles Krauthammer, Daniel Pipes and a few others. What he says in *ALSW* is dead-on as far as it goes; I only wish that he'd gone farther in the book to dispel the ignorance that clouds this dimly-understood topic. (He's done so in several essays for *Slate* since the book's publication.)

While *ALSW* is aimed principally at the Left, widespread claims about Hitchens's "apostasy" from the Left are exaggerated; this is decidedly not a book written "from the Right," in any clear sense of "from" or "the Right." And to be blunt, I think that's to Hitchens's credit. As he notes, one encounters a mindless exuberance nowadays on the Right about the idea of "empire" from writers who seem to think that empires rise and sustain themselves by some grand equivalent of the invisible hand. For my own part, as the grandson of a survivor of the Amritsar Massacre of 1919 (a notorious massacre by British-commanded troops of some 379 Indian civilians), I never know whether to laugh or to cry when conservatives blithely offer the British Raj as the optimistic "blueprint" of the American future, as with lamentable frequency they do (cf. Stanley Kurtz, "Democratic Imperialism: A Blueprint," *Policy Review*, [April 2003].) Hitchens's skepticism about empire in "Imperialism" (30-33)—bolstered, incidentally, by decades' worth of intelligent writing on the subject—is a welcome foil to the usual right-wing cant on this topic, as are the essays on regime change (46-48) and the fall of Baghdad (89-104). I hope conservatives will take some of this to heart, but I somehow doubt they will. (While I'm in a quixotic advice-giving mood, I might also recommend two other Hitchens essays on imperialism: the magisterial "A Sense of Mission: *The Raj Quartet*," pp. 213-227 in *Prepared for the Worst*, [New York: Hill and Wang, 1988], and "The Perils of Partition," in *The Atlantic*, [March 2003].)

Similarly, one senses none of the ethnocentrism and chauvinism in Hitchens's writing that one so often finds on the Right. I find it difficult to read right-wing journalism about the Arab/Muslim world without getting the sense that the people who write it do so for audiences that regard themselves as *ipso facto* superior to "non-Westerners"—and superior, principally by having been *born* in "the West." To his credit, Hitchens never writes that way, even when he's criticizing Arabs or Muslims; no non-Westerner is required to abase himself or herself before the omnibenevolence of "the West" in order to accept his arguments.

This is, to be sure, an issue that bores partisans of "political incorrectness," conservative, libertarian, and Objectivist—but perhaps it

shouldn't. Am I really the only person who cringes when I read, in the writings of an alleged defender of "inalienable property rights," that the Arabs of Mandate Palestine had no property rights worth respecting because they were little more than "nomadic tribes meandering across the terrain" of the future Jewish state (Leonard Peikoff, "Israel's – and America's – Fundamental Choice," <http://www.peikoff.com/essays/israel.htm>)? Or how about the hearty advice, proffered by the libertarian activist Jack Wheeler, that all Arabs be expelled from Jerusalem ("The Toleration of Evil," March 25, 2002; <http://www.albertarepublicans.org/wheeler.htm>)? (To the best of my knowledge, it was Wheeler, comically enough a former gun runner for the Afghan *mujahidin*, who first publicly floated the idea of "nuking Mecca" in retaliation for 9/11.) And then there's the charming advice of libertarian writer Vin Suprynowicz that we train our soldiers to follow Genghis Khan's advice: rape Muslim women, and teach their offspring to be like us (*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Sept. 23, 2001). The ubiquity of such anti-human drivel on the Right is an undeniable fact, and those suffocated by it but unwilling to turn Left may well find relief in Hitchens's writing.

Though I found Hitchens's critique of the anti-warriors persuasive, I was less satisfied by the way he put the case *for* war. In a cantankerous essay called "Chew on This," he lists three reasons:

The first is the flouting by Saddam Hussein of every known law on genocide and human rights....The second is the persistent effort by Saddam's dictatorship to acquire weapons of genocide....The third is the continuous involvement by the Iraqi secret police in the international underworld of terror and destabilization (54-5).

The second and third reasons, I think, combine to produce a fourth reason more compelling than either of the two on their own: if Saddam's Iraq had acquired WMDs, it's entirely plausible to think that those weapons could have been used against Americans with massive and lethal effect. Think, in this context, of the March 1995 sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway (11 dead, 5500 injured), or the as-yet unresolved anthrax murders of the fall of 2001; what, besides a *full* accounting of Iraq's WMD programs, would have precluded an Iraqi version of these attacks, perhaps on a larger scale?

It's worth bearing in mind that Hans Blix & Co. repeatedly and explicitly stressed—in hundreds of pages of otherwise cautiously bureaucratic prose—that they could provide no *certain* accounting of Iraq's WMDs. On dozens of issues discussed in UNMOVIC's 173-page "Cluster Document" of March 2003, the UN inspectors candidly confessed their "uncertainty" regarding this or that issue—where the "issues" in question included Iraq's possession or non-possession of anthrax, ricin, botulinum toxin, VX nerve gas, sarin, tabun,

and the like (go to “Cluster Document” at <http://www.unmovic.org>; “UNMOVIC” is the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission that replaced UNSCOM in 1999). A typical sentence from an UNMOVIC report (one of hundreds like it) tells us that the inspectors could not “reduce uncertainty” about Iraq’s possession or non-possession of WMDs until they began interviews, not-yet organized as of February 2003, of possible Iraqi personnel possibly involved in the alleged unilateral destruction of the weapons—gleaned from a list of personnel given to inspectors by...Iraq, which admittedly, had provided a fraudulent 12,000-page list of its weapons programs to the inspectors just three months earlier (paragraph 70[e] of *UNMOVIC Twelfth Quarterly Report*). Not exactly what I’d call a truth-tracking research program. We might fairly ask, then, how we were supposed to make provision for our national *security* if the best we were going to get from UNMOVIC was certainty of uncertainty. The only way to *approximate* certainty on these issues was armed intervention, a fact that Blix himself obliquely and grudgingly conceded in an interview with the *Toronto Star* (Sept. 21, 2003).

In this light, one trouble I have with Hitchens’s argument is the priority he gives to the liberationist as opposed to disarmament rationale for war, a priority loudly trumpeted by the book’s subtitle. The liberation of the Iraqi people, Hitchens suggests, was the only genuinely “moral” justification for war (18, 51); national self-interest, by contrast, has no specifically *moral* standing (14). He indulges in some grating anti-isolationist rhetoric in this connection. It was “naïve,” he remonstrates, for Americans to want to enjoy their “peace dividend” after the Cold War (3): “there is a self-satisfied isolationism to be found,” he continues, wagging his finger at us, “which seems to desire mainly a quiet life for Americans” (56).

Oh, come now. Is there really something so shameful about not wanting to go around invading foreign countries, occupying them, reconstructing them at a cost of \$87 billion, and incurring a daily-mounting toll of dead and mangled bodies? It is after all Hitchens who bears the burden of explaining why the desire for a quiet life must yield to the duty to place that life at risk, and his specifically liberationist argument is not the most compelling reason I’ve ever heard for wanting to spend time in the Sunni Triangle. The question is: why, exactly, was the liberation of Iraq *for Iraqis* a good enough reason to throw away *our* peace dividend and *our* quiet lives? I don’t see that it was, and I’m simply not convinced by Hitchens’s table-thumpings on the matter.

Sometimes Hitchens half-heartedly suggests that liberation was our responsibility because our government set Saddam Hussein’s regime up in the first place and propped it up along the way (6, 47-48). The latter part of that is nauseatingly true, but we were hardly alone in the sin; if past complicity in Ba’ath socialism were the basic argument for regime change, the responsibility would be corporate, not individual, and we could legitimately have begged off from

righting our errors through war by pointing to the reluctance of the other involved parties to make their contribution. Iraq is as much a Euro-Arab mess as it is an American one, and it's not clear why we have to fight and die for the sins of others as they insult us from the sidelines.

Sometimes Hitchens suggests that we simply have a responsibility to liberate those suffering from a regime as vile as Saddam's on the sheer altruistic grounds that they are suffering and we can help (51). But there are problems here that Hitchens overlooks. First, how does he reconcile this gung-ho altruism with the generally non-interventionist stance he took during the Cold War, when he spent much of his time (sometimes sensibly, sometimes intemperately) telling us *not* to do for the victims of Sino-Soviet socialism what he thinks we now *ought* to be doing for the victims of (Soviet-supported) Ba'ath socialism? In other words, why the imperative to liberate Iraq today but not Cuba in the 1960s, Cambodia in the 1970s, or Afghanistan in the 1980s? Second, how does Hitchens reconcile his liberationist commitments with the idea of limited government? The Constitution makes provision for the "common defense" of *Americans*, not the liberation of an open-ended series of non-Americans. So does the Constitution override liberation or is it the other way around? Third, a liberationist justification is simply unfair to the soldiers who have to fight the war, and can hardly be expected to function as cannon fodder for the effectuation of liberationist daydreams. A soldier by definition gets benefits from a war of national self-interest that he can't get from a war of altruistic liberation. Fairness, I think, demands a tighter connection between expected risk and prospective benefit than Hitchens acknowledges here.

Also puzzling to me is Hitchens's confident claim that the liberation of Iraq was "postponed." The suggestion seems to be that, in fighting the 1991 war, we should have used that occasion to invade and occupy Iraq right from the start. Here again, Hitchens fails to acknowledge the discontinuity between his recent views and those he expressed in the not-so-distant past. Hitchens's earlier writings seem to imply (more by tone than by explicit declaration) that we shouldn't have been meddling in the Gulf at all, whether to liberate Kuwait or to invade and occupy Iraq (cf. "Realpolitik in the Gulf: A Game Gone Tilt," *Harper's*, January 1991). I have to wonder whether Hitchens is now overcompensating for what he regards as his past errors. Though I agree with the need to fight the 2003 war, it's not clear to me that the anti-war arguments of 1990-91 were wrong back then. Had we not fought Iraq in 1991, we would not have assumed responsibility for the region thereafter, and might have avoided fighting the present war. Surely not fighting any wars beats having to fight two.

There are a few miscellaneous problems in *ALSW*—all relatively minor, but each somewhat annoying. In "Armchair General" (20-22), Hitchens bitterly criticizes the idea that those who advocate war in Iraq ought to be prepared to fight there themselves. He has a legitimate point, but neglects to mention that he was himself responsible for giving respectability to the idea he now criticizes

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(“Chicken Hawks,” pp. 273-275 in *Prepared for the Worst*). Similarly, in “Terrorism: Notes Toward a Definition” (23-26), Hitchens reverses the view he advanced earlier, to the effect that “terrorism,” being indefinable, is a mere right-wing propaganda term without determinate meaning (“Wanton Acts of Usage,” pp. 297-304 in *Prepared for the Worst*). It seems to me that Hitchens’s definition of the term in “Notes” is about as weak as his previous attempts to prove that it can’t be defined (23); both essays raise interesting questions but neither really bears out Hitchens’s case.

The one genuinely deficient essay in *ALSW* is “Prevention and Preemption” (43-45) which argues, paradoxically, that we lack an objective standard for determining who has initiated force in contexts of war, and thus lack a standard for the application of such concepts as “preventive” and “preemptive” war. Apart from undermining the whole point of the book—was the 1990 invasion of Kuwait morally on par with the 2003 invasion of Iraq?—the essay is too short and oversimplified to do justice to the issues. In any case, given Iraq’s wholesale violations of its post-Kuwait agreements, Operation Iraqi Freedom could with perfect accuracy be described as a mission of *enforcement*, thereby obviating any urgent need to discuss either prevention or preemption.

Having made these criticisms, however, let me add that there is a good deal more to cheer in this book than to criticize. And it’s a measure of the inverted priorities of our political culture that the book will undoubtedly be criticized more than it’s cheered. That, in fact, is less a prediction than a description: one doesn’t have to go far to encounter the abuse that’s been flung at Hitchens for the stance he’s taken in this book, or for that matter for his views on terrorism, Islamism and the malfeasances of the Left. “Racist,” “gunboat militarist,” “Orientalist,” “drunk,” “snitch,” and “sell-out,” are the standard accusations, made in the first two cases by people whose reputations Hitchens went out on a limb to defend (Noam Chomsky and Edward Said respectively) and in the last case by a scholar whose career he promoted when it wasn’t exactly a fashion statement to do so (Norman Finkelstein).

Those ugly facts make one of the opening passages of the book all the more poignant:

At the evident risk of seeming ridiculous, I want to begin by saying that I have tried for much of my life to write as if I was composing my sentences to be read posthumously. I hope this isn’t too melodramatic or self-centered a way of saying that I attempt to write as if I did not care what reviewers said, what peers thought, or what prevailing opinion might be....I am sincere when I say that the idea of the posthumous never quite deserts me (4-5).

It sounds self-serving, but it happens to be true. An insincere man could not have

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written a passage like that, and, I think, would not have written a book like this. It's a rare combination of sincerity, intelligence, and courage that makes this book the candidate for the "posthumous" that Hitchens has made it.

But I found myself wishing the book posthumous success in the more literal sense as well. A hundred years from now, "Operation Iraqi Freedom" will most probably be ancient history, covered, I suspect, in layers of falsehood perceptible only to the conceptual equivalent of an archaeologist. I can't predict the future, but I'd like to think that Hitchens's little book will serve as a sort of Rosetta Stone—the indispensable tool for translating the hieroglyphs of 2003 to the puzzled inquirers of the twenty-second century. I don't have the highest hopes that those inquirers will make sense of what this war was about, but if they do, they'll undoubtedly have Christopher Hitchens to thank for it.

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