

PLATONIC GUARDIANS: THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN OCCUPATIONS OF IRAQ, 1914-1932 AND 2003-2011

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Anglo-Saxon great powers two times tried to transform Iraq through occupational policies – arguably, with less than satisfactory results in both cases. This article contends that the ultimate reason for the failure of these transformations was the prevalence of a pattern among the occupiers here called “guardianship”. The concept of guardianship goes back to Plato’s The Republic, which envisages an all-knowing elite guiding the state. The driving forces behind the two occupations of Iraq – British colonial administrators and U.S. neoconservatives – were influenced by Plato’s thought and, indeed, shared some similarities with the guardians as described by him. In particular, convinced of having a privileged access to the truth, these latter-day guardians attempted to reshape Iraq according to a rationalist blueprint – a resurrected tribal society in the case of the British and a restored monarchy in the case of the Americans. In trying to impose these blueprints without much regard for the realities on the ground, these conservative administrators and politicians did exactly what conservatives normally criticize liberals and socialists for. In doing so, they fell prey to utopian thinking as criticized by Karl Popper in The Open Society and Its Enemies.

Keywords: Plato, utopian blueprints, Iraq, British Empire, U.S. Neoconservatism

Özet: Son yüz yıl boyunca Anglosakson büyük güçleri Irak’ı iki defa işgalci politikalarla dönüştürmeyi denediler ve -tartışmaya açık da olsa- her iki seferinden de tatmin verici olmaktan uzak sonuçlar aldılar. Bu makale sözkonusu dönüştürme çabalarının uğradığı başarısızlığın asıl nedeninin, işgalcilerde var olan ve burada “koruyuculuk” olarak anacağımız bir davranış kalıbı olduğunu savunmaktadır. Koruyuculuk kavramı Platon’un herşeyi bilen bir elitin devlet yönetimini tasvir ettiği Cumhuriyet eserine kadar gider. Irak’ın iki işgalinin arkasındaki itici güçler -İngiliz koloni idarecileri ve A.B.D. neokonservatistleri- de Platon’un düşüncesinden etkilenmişlerdir ve elbette, onun tanımladığı koruyucularla bazı ortak özellikleri paylaşmaktadırlar. Gerçeğe ulaşma ayrıcalığına sahip olduklarına ikna olmuş bu yeni koruyucular Irak’ı akılcı bir plan -İngiliz örneğinde kabileci toplumun yeniden yaşama geçirilmesi, Amerikan örneğinde ise bir monarşinin tekrar diriltilmesi ile-

çerçevesinde yeniden biçimlendirmeye çalışmışlardır. Saha gerçeklerine pek dikkat etmeksizin bu planları zorla benimsetmeye çalışan bu muhafazakar yöneticiler ve siyasetçiler, aslında muhafazakarların normalde liberalleri ve sosyalistleri eleştirdiği bir şeyi aynen yapmış oldular. Böylece Karl Popper'ın Açık Toplum ve Düşmanları'nda eleştirdiği şekliyle ütopyacı düşüncenin kurbanı olmuşlardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eflatun (Platon), ütopyacı planlar, Irak, İngiliz İmparatorluğu, A.B.D. neokonservatizmi

1. INTRODUCTION

'More nonsense has been written about Leo Strauss and the Iraq war than on virtually any other subject.'⁴⁶ Francis Fukuyama's (2006: 21) exasperation is directed against wide-spread allegations that the American invasion of Iraq had been masterminded by a cabale of neoconservative officials well-placed within the Bush administration. According to these allegations, the intellectual godfather of these neoconservatives was the German-American philosopher Leo Strauss, who taught them the merits of antidemocratic elitism and who legitimized lying and double standards (see, for example, Lind, 2003: 108-128).

Fukuyama rejects a link between the teachings of Strauss and the recent events in Iraq on two counts: First, there were no 'Straussians' in the Bush administration. The only suspect, Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, had merely studied briefly with Strauss and did not identify much with his work. Second, Strauss would have rejected American occupational policies in Iraq. Following Plato and Aristotle, he argued that specific 'regimes', which consist of the interaction of formal political institutions and informal cultural habits, shape the character of the people living under them. Trying to build a political order on abstract reason without taking nonrational cultural patterns into account would have been anathema to Strauss. Fukuyama indicates that this is exactly what the Bush administration was doing in Iraq (Fukuyama, 2006: 21-31).

Fukuyama is surely right that the more conspiratorial accounts about Strauss need to be rejected. Nevertheless, it is far from 'nonsense' to find aspects within American occupational policies in Iraq that are an indirect legacy of Strauss. This legacy consists in passing certain ideas found in Plato's book *The Republic* into contemporary political thinking in the USA. There were more people influenced by Strauss – and thus Plato – in the George W. Bush government than Fukuyama allows. Furthermore, it is misleading to interpret the neoconservative agenda of transforming Iraq simply as an example of rampant rationalism neglecting tradition; rather, abstract rationalism was used by them to uphold traditional institutions.

In addition to arguing against Fukuyama's dismissal of Strauss's influence, this article also draws parallels between the contemporary American and the earlier British occupation of Iraq. It will be shown that, despite notable differences, both occupations can be interpreted in the light of *The Republic*. In particular, both the British and later the American rulers of Iraq saw themselves as benevolent 'guardians' in a Platonic vein. Guardianship is overlapping with, but not the same as, 'the white man's burden' or 'manifest destiny'. A deeper analysis of that concept can help us to better understand what went wrong in Iraq in 2003 and after. It also shows us to what degree history repeats itself and to what degree the 2003-11 occupation differs from the one of 1914-32.

⁴⁶ A similar exasperation ('Give me a break.') is expressed by Boot (2004: 26).

2. PLATO'S *THE REPUBLIC*

2.1. The Work

What has a book from the Athens of the 5th century BC to do with 20th and 21st century Iraq? Before dealing with this question let us briefly summarize the work. *The Republic* consists of dialogues in which Plato's former teacher Socrates is allocated the function of his mouthpiece.

The book tackles the question: What is justice? Socrates first argues against conventional understandings of justice by pointing towards contradictory elements in these positions. He then gives the same treatment to a proponent of the rights of the strongest. Having scored rhetorical victory over alternative accounts, Socrates proceeds to give his own understanding of justice. For him, the human soul is divided into three parts which, to develop fully, respectively need moderation, courage and wisdom. If all of these elements work in harmony, with wisdom being in the commanding seat, a person can be said to possess justice. At the same time, such a person will be happy, no matter what misfortunes life may present to him.

Of crucial importance for our topic is the fact that Plato lets Socrates illustrate this harmonious integration of a person's soul by comparing it to an ideal city-state. The three different components of the human soul are paralleled by three social strata in this state: the common people, who are hard-working; the soldiers ('auxiliaries'), who are brave; and the rulers ('guardians'), who are wise. Membership in these strata is inheritable and even fostered by eugenic measures. However, there is a meritocratic element in that deserving offsprings from the other strata can become guardians or that unsuitable guardians may be transferred to the lower strata. While the acquisition of money is left to the common people, the guardians are forbidden to own private property or to have families. Instead, they live in communal compounds and are exposed to a tight educational regime of virtuous character-training. Thanks to this education and them not being distracted by private interests, the guardians rule selflessly for the best of all. The auxiliaries and the common people have no say in the government. In the interest of social stability, the guardians propagate the 'noble lie' that their own souls are different from those of the other strata. Plato also grants the possibility of women acting as guardians or auxiliaries, even though he does not question male superiority as such.

In the ontological parts of the *Republic*, Plato separates our everyday world that consists of superficial appearances from an ultimate reality of ideal 'forms' which exist eternally and of which the appearances are merely faulty copies. The most important one of these forms is that of the Good. While most people are stuck with appearances, the guardians can through rational contemplation, beginning with mathematics, get access to the forms and thus to true knowledge (cf. Annas, 1981).

2.2. The Interpretation as a Political Treatise

Of course, the ideal city-state sketched by Plato has never been established in reality and, in addition, is rooted in a largely agricultural, non-capitalist society very different from what existed in either the Anglo-Saxon great powers or Iraq during the last hundred years. However, *The Republic* is of more than simply antiquarian interest. Anthony Giddens has argued that in the social sciences a 'double hermeneutics' takes place: Social thinkers draw from social reality to develop metalinguistic concepts and theories that provide interpretations of this reality, including

proposals to change it. These social scientific concepts, in turn, are appropriated by laymen, including politicians, whose thoughts and acts are subsequently influenced by them. Thus, social science contributes to create or change the reality it describes (Giddens, 1984: xxxii-xxxv, 348-354).⁴⁷

In the case discussed here, Plato's writing can be seen as a response to the failure of democratic Athens in the war against Sparta, which possessed some of the features of the ideal state sketched in *The Republic*, as well as to the unjust execution of his teacher Socrates by this democracy. The book, in turn, was keenly read by layman actors throughout the ages, including our own. Arguably, *The Republic* is mainly a piece about the human soul, trying to show what it means to be a just person and that it also pays to be just, rather than unjust. Nevertheless, it can also be read as political philosophy and utopian blueprint. In fact, this has been the more popular interpretation in modern times (Annas, 2000: 33-36).

The British idealist philosopher Benjamin Jowett, who published his translation of Plato's collected works in 1871, saw it in that way. For him, the guardians were a meritocratic group devoted to public service. The ideal represented by them served as an antidote both to aristocratic privilege and to narrow-minded commercialism (Annas, 2000: 29-31). Jowett was the principal of Balliol College in Oxford and advised the committee that introduced competitive examination, instead of patronage, to the Indian Civil Service in 1854. Like the British upper classes in general, colonial administrators in India came to admire Plato's work (Woodruff, 1954: 15, 21, 75-79, 95-96, 360). In a similar vein, Sir Ralph Furse, who was in charge of applications for the Colonial Service between 1919 and 1948, was familiar with Plato and drew upon graduates from Balliol, Jowett's former college. Again, Plato could be found on the bookshelves of many administrators in Britain's colonial empire (Heussler, 1963: 70-71, 110).

In the contemporary USA, Leo Strauss has played the role of Jowett. A German philosopher who migrated to the USA during the 1930s, Strauss was not a political thinker in the narrow sense of the word. His work consists of dense interpretations of other philosophers, foremost among them Plato. Strauss argued that these writers, in order to escape public censure, had given a double meaning to their texts. Behind the surface argument, there was a hidden message that could only be discovered by close reading. Strauss's own writings also allow different interpretations. However, he can – and was – interpreted as arguing against contemporary liberalism's turn towards relativity. In a world lacking firm values, a return to the classical thinkers is necessary. In particular, the Platonic values (justice, wisdom, courage and prudence) need to be defended against legal rationality, commercialism and an instrumental approach to nature characterizing modernity. Even though democracy is here to stay, it must not succumb to mass culture but be guided by an intellectual and moral elite. This guardian-like stratum is sceptical of traditional values but publicly defends them for the sake of social stability (Fukuyama, 2006: 21-31; Kateb, 1995: 38-43; Mann, 2004: 26-28; Packer, 2006: 54; Söllner, 1995: 121-137).

Despite of Fukuyama's disclaimer, Strauss had a formidable influence on many of those responsible for the American occupation of Iraq. Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defence between 2001 and 2005 and one of the foremost hawks on Iraq, had been one of the students of Strauss's pupil Alan Bloom (who produced his own translation of *The Republic*) in the 1960s. Abram Shulsky, a self-confessed Straussian, was a high-level official in the Pentagon who co-authored the *Defence Policy Guidance* paper of 1992, of which more below. More generally, Strauss's ideas left their mark on William Kristol, editor of the the journal *The Weekly Standard*. As Fukuyama himself writes, Kristol together with the historian Robert Kagan was the moving force behind the younger generation of neoconservatives during the 1990s (Fukuyama, 2006: 40-

⁴⁷ A comparable approach in International Relations, not explicitly based upon Giddens, is Constructivism (Wendt, 1999).

44; Mann, 2004: 24-26, 28-29; Packer, 2006: 25-26, 53-56, 105-106). After 2001, representatives of this generation held powerful positions in the Pentagon, the Vice President's Office, the National Security Council, the Defence Policy Board and, to a lesser extent, the State Department (Packer, 2006: 38).

Thus, whether through the mediation of Jowett or Strauss, many of the British colonial officials and American neoconservatives were familiar with *The Republic*. So what? It was certainly not the case that these men used the work as blueprint for their own decisions and that thus everything they attempted to do with Iraq can be traced back to Plato's dialogue. The influence of Plato was more subtle: The groups discussed here discovered some of the characteristics attributed to the guardians in themselves and tried to act accordingly.

Supporting evidence for this claim can be gained if we understand the Platonic guardians and the state run by them as an ideal type in the vein of Max Weber. An ideal type is not a classificatory description of an empirical case – obviously, occupied Iraq is not a city state. Rather, the ideal type is a consciously exaggerated and one-sided model which, by way of comparison with real social phenomena, helps us to better comprehend the latter (Weber, 1988: 190-212). Interpreting the colonial officials and the neoconservatives in this light is meaningful if we can establish some similarities between them and the ideal-typical guardians.

3. LATTER-DAY GUARDIANS

3.1. Social Background

We have seen that Plato's guardians are a group whose lifestyle, upbringing and values are different from the other groups in the ideal state. Most of them are born as guardians, but the stratum is open for talented members of the other groups.

The British colonial officials that run Iraq came from a status group (Weber, 1972: 179-180, 534-538) whose social background was similar to that of Plato's guardians. Applicants to the Indian Civil Service were selected by competitive examinations which could principally be entered by everyone. However, membership for that bureaucratic entity came quite often from specific families, with sons of clergymen and army officers being disproportionately represented (Woodruff, 1954: 77, 366). Applicants to the Colonial Service usually had a landed background, reflecting the view that certain kinds of personal and educational qualities rested in specific families. The principle of primogeniture and the economic decline of that rural elite also made for material incentives to join the Colonial Service. Social climbers were not categorically rejected, but those coming from the working classes or from the Celtic provincial elite had little chance to be taken.

Successful applicants had normally been educated at public schools (elitist institutions, despite the name). The future British colonial officials usually did not enjoy warm and close family relationships and thus directed their own emotional warmth towards their classmates. The public schools had Spartan conditions and put the emphasis upon the development of leadership qualities and character, rather than professional education. They also inculcated their inmates with a feeling of separatedness both from Britain's industrial society as well as from the people they were later to rule. To the degree that they found a common cultural ground, it was with the traditional elites of the indigenous societies in Britain's overseas dependencies (Heussler, 1963: 34-36, 68-70, 75-76, 82-106).

The upper levels of the British administration in Iraq tended to come from these strata, as can be demonstrated by three prominent examples. Percy Cox was Chief Political Officer and later Civil Commissioner between 1914 and 1918 and, again, between 1920 and 1923 – in other words, Britain's first proconsul in Iraq. He was the younger son of a reasonably well-off landowner. Cox attended Harrow, a public school, and, barred from his father's inheritance due to primogeniture, entered the military academy at Sandhurst to join the Indian Army (Graves, 1941: 19-25). The father of Arnold Wilson, who acted as Civil Commissioner between 1918 and 1920, was headmaster of a public school and then vicar at a provincial industrial town. Similar to Cox, Wilson went to Clifton (another public school) and to Sandhurst. In line with his upbringing, Wilson combined admiration for warlike Iraqi tribesmen with dislike to both middle-class Arabs and English intellectuals (Marlowe, 1967: 3-25, 256). In contrast to the upper middle-class background of these two men, Gertrude Bell, their Oriental Secretary between 1917 and 1925, was a scion of rich steel industrialist and merchant families. Despite these ties to industrialism, Bell had adopted the lifestyle of the countryside and felt attached to an 'old England' that was in the process of disappearing. She kept social distance to the lower classes, albeit stressing in a Plato-like way the shared responsibilities of workers and factory owners for the best of the whole (Lukritz, 2006: 13-14, 35, 39, 43-45, 120).

Given the more mobile character of contemporary American society compared to early 20th century Britain, it is less easy to identify a specific status group as carrier stratum of the Iraq occupation. Instead, a brief reference to the most prominent neoconservative with respect to the Iraq issue, Wolfowitz, must suffice. Wolfowitz has a solid academic background as son of America's leading statistician. He won a scholarship at Cornell, his father's university, and was then mentored at the University of Chicago by Albert Wohlstetter, who had studied together with Wolfowitz's father and who was a famous mathematical logician and nuclear strategist. Wohlstetter also introduced Wolfowitz to his future neoconservative comrade-in-arms, Richard Perle (Mann, 2004: 23, 29-31). Similar to the English country gentlemen described above, Wolfowitz owed his career not so much to his family's wealth but due to its social capital.

Turning to female guardians, Oriental Secretary Bell came close to that type. She was enormously influential within the otherwise male-dominated British administration of Iraq. Significantly, she herself had been an active opponent of voting rights for women because she deemed that as against the natural order (Lukritz, 2006: 49-51). As in *The Republic*, the existence of female guardians does not contradict male superiority as such. In contrast, and despite all the advances made in the last eighty years as far as women's political rights are concerned, women are conspicuously absent among the neoconservative office holders. In this respect, they actually even fell behind Plato's lacklustre feminism.

Thus, while the social background of British rulers of Iraq resembles that of the Platonic guardians in many respect, their neoconservative American counterpart are much more removed from the ideal type.

3.2. Property

Neither the British colonial officials nor the American neoconservatives were people without property and private family life. In this respect, a vast gulf separates them from Plato's vision. Nevertheless, the colonial officials were forbidden to own land and to engage in trade in the British overseas dependencies. As a corollary, their values disparaged narrow-minded concern with earning money (Annas, 2000: 30; Heussler, 1963: 35-36; Woodruff, 1954: 76). In this respect, there were similarities between them and the Platonic guardians, which were separated from the money-earning producers. An exception to this pattern was former Civil Commissioner Wilson, who after quitting administrative service worked for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company

(today BP), which was active in the Persian Gulf. Then, this shift from officialdom to private business was seen as unusual and met some criticism (Marlowe, 1967: 237-41).

In the contemporary USA, it is quite common for leaders to switch to and fro between politics, business and/or academia, prominent recent examples being Cheney, Rumsfeld and Rice (Mann, 2004: 101-103, 147-149, 165-166, 225-226, 229, 231). Arguably, the Texas-based Halliburton company, which won valuable contracts (oil-related engineering as well as services to the US military) in Iraq, profited from the fact that its former CEO Cheney had become Vice President (Briody, 2004: 181-237). But in the case of the neoconservatives proper, most of them were career officials and intellectuals without specific business ties. In this respect, they resemble the British guardians. The exception is Zalmay Khalizad, US ambassador to Afghanistan between 2003 and 2005 and to Iraq between 2005 and 2006, who had worked for the oil company UNOCAL during the mid-1990s (Phillips, 2005: 91).

3.3. Knowledge

Plato's guardians have intellectual access to the forms, i.e. the ultimate reality unknown to the other strata. It is this knowledge of the Good and the true that entitles them to rule the ideal city-state.

Among the British officials, there was an unquestioned belief into what was right and wrong and into their own morally superior position that has been described as 'kindly dogmatism' by an observer. The assumption that there are no firmly established moral values was not for them (Heussler, 1963: 60, 68-69, 101). For example, like most Indian Civil Service members and army officers, Wilson was firmly opposed to the policies of the Liberal Party in Britain with its (in his eyes) naive belief in the perfectability of the world. Likewise, he detested those who out of short-sighted belief in financial economy called for a cutting down of Britain's imperial commitments. Instead, he adhered to a Christian-inspired faith in the righteousness of the imperial cause (Marlowe, 1967: 252-253).

It is instructive to compare these assumptions with the language found in the 1997 'Statement of Principles' of the Project for the New American Century, a pressure group that includes such neoconservative luminaries as Wolfowitz, Abrams and Khalizad, but also Fukuyama, Cheney and Rumsfeld: '(T)he promise of short-term commercial benefits threatens to override strategic considerations' (www.newamericancentury.org). Like Wilson, they lambasted economy. The other bogeyman, echoing the Liberal do-gooders of Wilson, was the Clinton administration with its alleged over-emphasis on international organizations like the UN and 'soft' issues like poverty and ethnic conflicts (Packer, 2006: 40).

These assumptions go together with a lack of self-questioning and a tendency to start deductively with a certain premise, into which the facts are then made to fit. Particularly Wolfowitz is said to have been unwilling to accept any kind of evidence that was contrary to his preassumptions. For example, when on the eve of the Iraq invasion the army Chief of Staff declared that as many as several hundred thousand soldiers would be needed, he was strongly reprimanded by Wolfowitz (Galbraith, 2007: 113; Packer, 2006: 106-107, 114-117, 391). One White House aide explained (self-ironically?): 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality' (Packer, 2006: 390).

It is this self-assurance that the contemporary American neoconservatives share with the British colonial officials. It links both of them with Platonic guardians who, as we have seen, have spiritual access to the truth and are likewise convinced of their own superior virtue. In the case of the British, this self-assurance comes from the character-building education in the public schools. In the case of Wolfowitz, it is telling that he started as a mathematical strategist. Plato

argues that guardians should know mathematics, because it can be of use for military purposes (Annas, 1981: 275). Furthermore, the objects of mathematics (numbers, geometrical lines etc.) do not exist in material reality but are purely imaginary. Nevertheless, they have a profound impact upon this material reality. In the same vein, the neoconservative visions for Iraq represented for them a pure truth that could be imposed upon a more mundane reality. Let us now turn to these visions.

4. TRANSFORMING IRAQ

4.1. Repressive Squirecracy

According to the mindset of the British guardians, Iraq had suffered for centuries from Ottoman mismanagement (Dodge, 2003: 43-61) and was now a blank slate to be reshaped by themselves. In late 1918, Acting Civil Commissioner Wilson argued that a British-occupied Iraq would drive a wedge into the Islamic world and thus prevent an anti-British Muslim combination. Iraq was to be politically isolated from the other Arabic-speaking countries but, at the same time, serve as 'a model to the rest' (Marlowe, 1967: 146). All this sounds familiar from the perspective of the early 2000s: There are the obsession with an Islamic threat and the ambition that a reformed Iraq will exert a positive influence over the rest of the Middle East.

The British officials overseeing Iraq felt an aversion both to the nationalistically oriented middle-class professionals, the *effendis* (Eppel, 1998), and to the Shi'i religious scholars, the *mujtahids* (Jabar, 2003: 159-198; Nakash, 1994: 141-154). In line with their own rural background, they considered both groups as degenerate and fanatic town-dwellers. In contrast, they favoured Iraq's tribesmen, whom they considered as warlike noble savages lacking the degenerate characteristics of the detested townsmen and ruled by benevolent and noble chiefs, the *shaykhs*. In the eyes of the British, Iraq's tribes were a patriarchal society in which rulers and ruled were bound together by mutual affection. The image of a lost Merry Old England was projected into rural Iraq, with the *shaykhs* taking over the role of the squires (Dodge, 2003: 1, 46, 63-100).

The relationship between the British and the Iraqi tribes was not an easy one. Subjecting the tribes to effective taxation caused a number of tribal rebellions, especially the big uprising of 1920 (Vinogradov, 1972). Nevertheless, the British stuck to their policy of favouring the *shaykhs*. Following the model of British India's Northwest Frontier, tribesmen were put under a legal system different from that applied to urban Iraqis. Under the Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulations of 1916-24, the *shaykhs* were to act as judges. Furthermore, *shaykhs* having seats in the parliament formed a tribal bloc of deputies who usually opposed the nationalists. Finally, in the ranks and files of the nascent Iraqi army, tribespeople dominated (Batatu, 1978: 63-152; Dodge, 2003: 83-100, 142; Sluglett, 1976: 239-252).

This policy was particularly pursued by officials that had previously served in British India. They oriented themselves to the administrative order established at India's Northwest Frontier Province during the late 19th century, when the British backed up the local chiefs and used them as their medium of administration. In this view, land was to be held in common by the tribe. A dissenting view was that of officials having previously served in Egypt, who were more in favour of fostering individual peasant proprietors. However, the pro-tribalist view prevailed.

The result was a land policy that was partially a break and partially a continuation with previous Ottoman practices. Between 1869 and 1914, the Ottomans had had some success in

breaking up the larger tribes and weakening the power of the chiefs. The British now reversed this process, frequently creating 'traditional' tribal chiefs in an artificial way. On the other hand, the late Ottoman period had started a process of latifundia formation. This was continued by the British, through whose backing the major chiefs succeeded in turning communal tribal land into their own estates. Thus, British policy had an unintended effect. Instead of patriarchal squires, the *shaykhs* tended to become big landlords while free tribesmen turned into serf-like peasants living under appalling conditions. (Dodge, 2003: 101-129; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 1983; Sluglett, 1976: 231-253). The rural utopia envisaged by the guardians turned into a nightmare, thus paving the way for the 1958 revolution.

4.2. Failed Restoration

There were certainly differences of opinions within the British guardians, especially over the question whether direct colonial control or indirect rule through an indigenous administration overseen by the British was preferable. This conflict, resolved in 1920 in favour of the latter option (Paris, 1998; Sluglett, 1976: 9-50), was a fight within the family. As such, the British guardians were a homogenous group that managed to implement its vision for Iraq. In contrast, the American neoconservatives were just one faction among several in the George W. Bush government and found it more difficult to get their project realized in view of the existence of competing groups.

First, there were the pragmatic internationalists, mainly to be found in the State Department and with Secretary of State Colin Powell as their main representative. Instead of America going it alone, they wanted to involve international organizations like NATO and UN as far as possible into the Iraq venture. Many among the State Department officials dealing with the Middle East were also sceptical about regime change. They would have preferred to replace Saddam Husayn by a pro-American strongman rather than taking the risk that democratic elections would bring unwanted elements into power (Galbraith, 2007: 95; Packer, 2006: 66; Phillips, 2005: 42, 57, 63, 128).

The second group consisted of the hegemonic realists, led by Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld. They saw the world in terms of an unceasing power struggle between states and recommended using American military force globally in order to dispose of existing or potential threats. In contrast to the pragmatic internationalists, they tended to discount the importance of international organizations in favour of American dominance. In contrast to the neoconservatives, they thought in military terms and had little interest in regime change and nation-building as such (Dunn, 2003: 285; Packer, 2006: 42, 64-65, 114, 244-245; Phillips, 2005: 56).

Facing these two groups were the neoconservatives, which did not have representatives in the Cabinet but which were, as we have seen, well-represented in different high-level administrative positions. While sharing with the previous group the emphasis on American dominance, they did not see this dominance merely as offsetting threats but as a force to change the world for the better. Regime change in Iraq was a goal worthwhile in itself. A reformed Iraq would replace Saudi Arabia as the USA's main ally in the Persian Gulf region, bring OPEC down to its heels and, at the same time, spread democracy and a free market economy throughout the Middle East (Dunn, 2003: 285, 290; Galbraith, 2007: 9-10; Herring and Rawala, 2006: 7-8, 224; Packer, 2006: 60-61; Phillips, 2005: 56). There was thus a latent tension between the aims of the hegemonic realists and the neoconservatives, especially over the need for nation-building (Boot, 2003: 28).

However, the latter largely deferred to the former. This pattern goes back to 1992, when Cheney was Secretary of Defence. A neoconservative trio of Pentagon officials – Wolfowitz, Shulsky and Khalizad - produced a paper called *Defence Policy Guidance*. The agenda of this paper was that the USA should use its global power to prevent any potential rival, namely Germany or Japan, from emerging. There was not yet much mentioning of democratic regime change (Packer, 2006: 13-14, 21-22). Eleven years later, Wolfowitz supported Rumsfeld's plan of removing Saddam with a streamlined military force – a plan that was brilliant from the point of view of military strategy but inadequate for implementing the large-scale transformation of Iraqi society that the neoconservatives had in mind (Packer, 2006: 115-116).

Why did Wolfowitz and the other neoconservatives not confront Cheney and Rumsfeld head-on? Timidity in not wanting to offend their bosses may have been a motive. However, interpreting them as Platonic guardians suggests a more subtle interpretation: Even though guardians know better, they often publicly endorse certain myths believed by those uninitiated into true wisdom. Aware that an ambitious and costly project of transformation in Iraq would not have been favoured by mainstream conservatives like Cheney and Rumsfeld, the neoconservatives argued in terms which their less intellectually inclined superiors understood: military force and American dominance. Using this discourse as vehicles, the neoconservatives hoped to implement their own. It was the case of a Platonic 'noble lie' – albeit, arguably, the neoconservatives largely lied to themselves in this case.

How would the new Iraq envisaged by the neoconservatives have looked like? In the original version, very much like an avatar of the state created by the British. In 1996, a study group issued a manifesto entitled *A Clean Break* that recommended Israel to turn away from the peace process with the Palestinians and to forcefully reshape the Middle East. Among the signatories were the neoconservatives Richard Perle, later Chairman of the US Defence Policy Board Advisory Committee, and Douglas Feith, later Undersecretary of Defence for Policy. Author of the paper was Richard Wurmser, later Principal Deputy Assistant in the Vice President's Office, who elaborated upon these ideas in a book in 1999.

Wurmser diagnosed the problems of the Middle East as arising from the attack of modernity and secularism against the traditional elites. He recommended the restoration of the kingdom of Iraq. Its former rulers, the Hashimite dynasty, would as descendants of the Prophet exert influence over Iraq's Shi'is. Thanks to the latter's regional connections, the new Iraq would pursue a foreign policy supportive to Israel (Packer, 2006: 30-31). Other neoconservative intellectuals like Feith seconded these ideas. While the Muslim world as such was seen as sunk into fanaticism and decline, the Shi'i branch of Islam was singled out as a rational religion having the potential of transforming the region. According to these ideas, Prime Minister of the restored Iraqi monarchy should be Ahmad Chalabi, a Shi'i and head of the US-supported exile party Iraqi National Congress (INC) (Packer, 2006: 108-09, 129).

Chalabi was the scion of one of the leading merchant-cum-politician families under the monarchy in Iraq. Having gone into exile after the 1958 revolution, Chalabi gained a Ph.D. in mathematics at the University of Chicago, founded one of Jordan's leading banks (which subsequently collapsed) and finally became head of the INC. He was close to Perle and Wolfowitz, who had found a fellow mathematician in him. Despite endorsing liberal democracy, Chalabi owed his rise to the top of the INC not to mass politics and elections but to cultivating the right people. He was prone to give over-optimistic estimations about how the Iraqis would welcome the Americans as liberators in order to foster his case for an overthrow of Saddam (Galbraith, 2007: 84-87; Packer, 2006: 75-78; Phillips, 2005: 62, 69-70) – another instance of the 'noble lie'.

Just like the British tried to revive a tribal system that had been weakened by half a century of Ottoman centralization, many neoconservatives wanted to restore a monarchy that had ceased

to exist almost five decades earlier. However, this plan did not take off, despite promising beginnings.

On the eve of the war, having been given the responsibility for the post-war administration of Iraq, the Pentagon and its associated neoconservatives (namely Feith) managed to marginalize the State Department. Officials not considered to be on the right ideological line were not welcome to take part in the running of Iraq (Galbraith, 2007: 95; Packer, 2006: 105, 124-125; Phillips, 2005: 126-128).

However, that the Pentagon was in control does not mean that the neoconservatives there could run the show alone. The first, short-lived US administration, the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, was headed by the ex-general Jay Garner. In line with the neoconservative vision, he envisaged a quick return to Iraqi sovereignty. However, his plans for a very limited de-Ba'athification (i.e. the purge of the state apparatus from members of the formerly governing Ba'ath Party) and for keeping the Iraqi army intact were anathema to the neoconservatives. He also aimed at a broadly-based postwar government and did not wholeheartedly back the INC, for which he was criticized by Feith (Packer, 2006: 128, 133, 140, 191).

Garner's successor, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority Paul Bremer, a former diplomat, provided a turn-about which was equally uncongenial to the neoconservatives. His dissolving the Iraqi army and a far-reaching de-Ba'athification decree were in line with their ideas. However, he postponed Iraq's return to sovereignty and fought off Wolfowitz's and Feith's attempt to end formal American rule earlier. Bremer also buried the last hopes that the INC alone would be handed over the government (Bremer, 2006: 167-172, 205; Packer, 2006: 190-191, 195).

After Iraq's return to formal sovereignty in 2004, the role of American proconsul was taken by ambassadors. One of them was Zalmay Khalizad, who comes closest to a neoconservative version of Cox. Earlier on, serving under the State Department go-between with the Iraqi exile parties, Khalizad had voiced support for a limited de-Ba'athification and sometimes crossed swords with the INC. This, despite his close ties with Perle and Wolfowitz, probably made him lose that job (Galbraith, 2007: 115; Phillips, 2005: 91, 110, 148-149). After being Ambassador to the USA's other Middle Eastern dependency, Afghanistan, Khalizad took over in Iraq. Overseeing the drafting of a new constitution by the elected Constitutional Assembly, Khalizad over the objections of secular Iraqis accepted a provision that included Islamic jurists on the country's Constitutional Court (Galbraith, 2007: 199). This can be seen as a pragmatic response to the demands of the dominant Shi'i Islamists rather than the outcome of ideological conviction. Nevertheless, Khalizad's decision harks back to the original neoconservative visions, which pursued an unabashedly pro-Shi'i and traditionalist agenda.

By the time of Khalizad's tenure, the neoconservatives had largely lost their influence over the formulation of Washington's Iraq policy (Woodward, 2006: 116-117, 309-310, 312, 400). The latter had now become the responsibility of the State Department headed by Condoleezza Rice, who upheld the vision of Iraq's occupation sparking off a transformation of the Middle East (Woodward 2006: 479). However, with the coming to power of Obama the last vestige of neoconservative influence has disappeared from the White House, at least for the time being. The new Iraq that has emerged is a far cry from a restored monarchy pursuing a pro-Israel policy. Different to the British guardians, their later American counterparts lost control of the process fairly early on.

4.3. Indigenous Guardians

Despite having recourse to their respective main allies – the tribal *shaykhs* in the case of the British and the (less effective) INC in the case of the Americans – , the Anglo-Saxon guardians had to find a *modus vivendi* with Iraqi groups who, like them, also had a utopian vision of reshaping Iraqi society under their own guardianship. In other words, two groups of would-be guardians – one foreign and one Iraqi – found themselves forced into an uneasy and conflictual collaboration.

In British-occupied Iraq, the political elites consisted of tribal *shaykhs*, urban notables and active and former military officers. The latter were close to the first King, Faysal I, and dominated the early cabinets. Originally from modest backgrounds, their political position allowed them to acquire riches and to turn into big landowners – a trajectory comparable to that of the tribal *shaykhs* (Pool, 1980). Ideologically, most of these men were pan-Arab nationalists, who wanted Iraq to become the Prussia of the Arab world. During their time in the Ottoman army, they had been exposed to the view of German military advisors that it was the army that was to lead society with an iron hand. They embraced the idea of change from above, with themselves being in the driving seat (Batatu, 1978: 299-300, 320-321; Eppel, 1998; Simon, 1986: 7-30).

As Pan-Arabists, these officers looked beyond Iraq. Their patron, King Faysal, was himself not from Iraq but a Hijazi (from what is today Saudi Arabia). While most of the officers had been born in what was later to become Iraq, their previous career had centered elsewhere. Before World War I, they had served the Ottoman Empire, which then ruled the bulk of the Arab world. After the war, many of them held posts in Syria during Faysal's brief administration there between 1918 and 1920. In addition to them, there was a high number of Syrian and Palestine teachers in the Iraqi educational system, including the main thinker of Arab nationalism, Sati' al-Husri (Simon, 1986: 30-31, 47-50, 75, 95). Iraq's indigenous guardians thus were part of a social space transcending Iraq's borders.

Many decades later, the Americans found themselves in an uneasy collaboration with another group of transnationally-oriented guardians. These guardians were the *mujtahids*, the legal scholars who interpret the holy scriptures for the Shi'i believers. Iraq's most respected *mujtahid* was 'Ali as-Sistani, who was catapulted into a key position in Iraqi politics in the power vacuum following Saddam's overthrow. Sistani rejected the concept, officially held in Iran, that the leading *mujtahid* himself should be the highest political authority. However, he asserted a veto right for this stratum. Thus, he effectively forced Bremer to give up plans for indirectly elected constitutional conventions or provisional legislatures. These bodies would have been dominated by professionals chosen by the Americans and not necessarily receptive to clerical influence (Diamond, 2005: 39-52, 76-87, 136-138, 327-328; Packer, 2006: 316-317; Phillips, 2005: 177-186; Vissar, 2004: 137-138). Instead, two parliamentary elections were held in 2005, each of which were won by Shi'i Islamist parties. Running on separate lists, they again did strongly in the 2010 elections.

Albeit differing in degrees, these parties embraced an overseeing political role for the *mujtahids* (Jabar, 2003: 24-27, 78-109, 235-254). Again, these indigenous guardians were part of transnational networks, this time encompassing the Shi'i Muslim social space. Of the four leading *mujtahids* in Iraq, three were non-Arabs. Sistani, the most important among them, was an Iranian citizen and had followers not only in Iraq but also among Shi'is elsewhere. He acted as trustee for the al-Khu'i Foundation, a charitable institution operating on a global scale. Likewise, Iraq's Shi'i Islamist parties had branches and supporters abroad (Feldman, 2004: 37; Galbraith, 2007: 174; Jabar, 2003: 235; Phillips, 2005: 106; Vissar, 2004: 139-140).

5. CONCLUSION: THE PERILS OF GUARDIANSHIP

In this article, it has been argued that those involved with the two Anglo-Saxon occupations of Iraq have been indirectly influenced by Plato and that they have many characteristics of ideal-typical Platonic guardians.

Understood as a real type, rather than ideal type, guardianship in the context of Britain's and the USA's nation-building ventures can be defined as a political elite which

- *believes in firm moral values and objective truth accessible to itself and which thus feels immune from questioning and criticism.*
- *possesses strong influence within the bureaucratic apparatus of a great power with a liberal democratic political system.*
- *sees this great power, i.e. their own country, as a benevolent global hegemon.*
- *attempts to foster this hegemony by transforming occupied non-Western countries in line with a conservative utopian vision, particularly by restoring previous elites in these countries back to power.*
- *is thereby also forced into an uneasy collaboration with a competing group of indigenous, but transnationally oriented guardians.*

Besides highlighting the parallels, the concept of guardianship also helps us to trace out some differences between the British and the American cases. First, the British guardians were a homogenous status group permeating the governing apparatus that run the overseas empire. In contrast, the American guardians were just one governmental faction among several. This first contrast explains the second: The British guardians successfully imposed a tribalist political system over Iraq that lasted for decades. The American guardians found their dream of restoring the monarchy and putting the INC into power stopped in its tracks. Third, the British guardians come closest to the ideal type with respect to their social background and education. In the case of the American guardians, the ideal-typical elements they meet best is the knowledge of mathematics (and the corresponding mind-set) and the 'noble lie'.

Ultimately, the British-imposed vision for Iraq was undone by the revolution of 1958.

There might still be a moderately happy ending for America's Iraq venture. But there is no doubt that the neoconservative vision of a quick transition of Iraq from totalitarian dictatorship to the Middle East's model democracy did not work. What went wrong? In the orbituaries of Iraq's stint of liberal democracy, the charges of hypocrisy (it was all about oil anyway) and of incompetence (there was no plan B) abound.

The concept of guardianship suggests a different interpretation. By using their superior reason, Plato's guardians have privileged access to an ultimate reality otherwise hidden by appearances. The highest form of this ultimate reality is the Good. Access to this truth is denied to most people, who are driven by non-rational forces like craving for honour or wealth. Consequently, the guardians should be in charge, telling the others what to do. Because guardians know the truth, no discussion is necessary or even desirable. It was this self-assurance of having exclusive knowledge what is best that was behind the colonial officials' disregard of the aspirations of urban middle-class Iraqis. It was also behind the neoconservatives' unwillingness to tolerate dissenting voices and to think about a Plan B. In both cases, it was also

behind the tendency to come up with elegantly simple formulas for an imaginary Iraq that foundered upon confrontation with the very different visions of the Iraqis themselves.

One stock-in-trade argument of philosophical conservatism might be applicable here: Rational blueprints for an ideal society can never work because politics is a practical, not theoretical, activity. Instead of stumbling into a futile search for universally valid solutions, it is much better to immerse oneself into living tradition (see, for example, Oakeshott, 1962). If we translate this argument to the case of occupied Iraq, we could interpret the American occupation as a typical example of rationalist hybris.

However, this time, the conservative argument against rationalism would have to be used, not against starry-eyed liberal or socialist social engineers, but against fellow conservatives, i.e. Wolfowitz and his pals. One way out of this, for a conservative thinker, embarrassing quandry would be to assert that the neoconservatives are not really conservatives. After all, their first generation consisted of disappointed socialists and liberals who, when they passed over to conservatism, took their ideas about the perfectability of men with them. This is the argument of Fukuyama. As we have seen, he scolds them for relying too much on abstract reason. As such, this charge is correct. However, it has to be added that the vision of the neoconservatives was at least partially traditionalist, built upon institutions every old-time conservative would have cherished: monarchy and religion.

Furthermore, the case of foreign guardianship in Iraq shows that the pattern decried by philosophical conservatives – misguided rationalism – has also been practiced by guardians that can be much more unambivalently identified as traditional conservatives. Guardians like Cox, Wilson or Bell certainly shared the belief in the imperfectability of humans and they tried to preserve what they considered to be the traditional and authentic authorities of Iraq, namely the tribal *shaykhs*. But, in doing so, they also fell prey to the rationalist illusion: Neatly dividing the Iraqis into tribal and nontribal people and imposing chiefly authority where it had disappeared or even never existed, they were as diligent social engineers as their neoconservative successors. Indeed, identifying a tradition and imposing it upon people is as much a case of rationalism as a revolution from above, or from below. Clearly, the conservative charge against rationalism can be turned against the conservatives themselves.

A more convincing, and more helpful, case against guardianship has been raised by liberal thinkers, namely Karl Popper. According to this criticism, water-proof knowledge as claimed by the guardians is impossible because society undergoes a constant process of change. Furthermore, while we might be able to rationally select the best means for an end, the ends themselves can never be established by rational comprehension. Guardians thinking that they, and only they, know the truth are unwilling to take opposing viewpoints and values seriously. The result is, at best, intellectual stagnation or, at worst, violent conflict followed by repression. However, although he shares the conservatives' rejection of human perfectability, Popper's notion of a constantly changing society prevents him from falling back to allegedly time-honoured tradition. Instead, he recommends an open society that allows discussion between different approaches and that improves itself by pragmatically tackling concrete problems, rather than painting perfect but unattainable blueprints (Popper, 1945).

Popper's criticism is particularly directed against Plato and Marx. With his blunt recommendation for 'problem-solving', his liberal approach is also opposed to Marxist-inspired Critical Theory in International Relations (see, for example, Cox, 1981). However, it can equally be directed against attempts on part of conservatives to establish tribalist, or monarchical, utopias in far-away countries. If Popper's notion of an open society would be heeded, a liberal democratic Middle East may yet emerge.

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