



Selling War: A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine by Steven J. Alvarez.

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This is an angry book. Maj. Steven J. Alvarez (ret.) served in Iraq with the US Army as a public affairs officer (PAO) in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He has written a forceful first-hand account of the failure of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Iraqi transitional government to shape public opinion in favor of a more democratic political system. He pulls no punches, calling the CPA informational briefings “chest-beating, feel-good events designed to evoke feelings of U.S. accomplishment and progress in Iraq” (xi); the CPA’s message was both biased and aimed at the wrong audience: “the American government was too busy talking to the American media, and the Iraqi government was not talking to anyone,” including their own people (xi-xvi). Insurgent elements rushed in to fill the resulting information vacuum.

As a PAO, Alvarez strove “to communicate with the Iraqi masses” as part of a concerted counterinsurgency campaign mapped out by Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, his commanding officer. The early chapters of *Selling War* concern the US troops’ lack of preparation for occupation duties and a demanding “hearts and minds” campaign. An “hour-long cultural-awareness block of instruction” taught by a contractor who, according to Alvarez, was more standup comedian than cultural expert “was supposed to prepare a soldier for a year of interpersonal interaction with Iraqis” (15). When he arrived at the Green Zone in Baghdad, Alvarez was staggered by the “lavish debacle of U.S. overspending on luxuries, ... lobster tails, steaks, and ice cream” (19) convoyed in at high risk to hapless US soldiers.¹

Such wretched excess impeded the CPA’s mission to help the Iraqi people, who were suffering deprivations caused by decades of trade sanctions and warfare. The author quickly learned that

PAOs serve two masters, a concept I have never liked but grudgingly accepted.... For example, in Iraq my actions and messages were not only governed by the leadership of the Multinational Security Transition Command Iraq and my commanding general, but also monitored and controlled by Defense Department PAOs, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) PAOs, and the Army’s Office of the Chief, Public Affairs. All of these entities jockeyed for control of what we did, what we said, how we said it, and when we’d say it. It is a redundancy that brings staleness and stagnation to the field of public affairs. It also kills expediency. (26)

In short, Alvarez had too many bosses—and too much red tape to cut through—to do his job effectively.

The author was faced with dishonest PAOs, who “desperately scrounged up metrics [in 2004] for reports, numbers, dollars, megawatts [to show restoration of Iraq’s electrical grid], anything that they could use to pad the stellar record of underachievement and hide the fact that a year of valuable time had like sand somehow slipped through their [the CPA’s] hands.” They were, in a word, “delusional,” though very adept at “greasy public relations” (35-37). They didn’t fool Iraqis, but they did cover the CPA with a fig leaf as it departed Iraq, its mission unaccomplished.

Alvarez now had a mission of his own:

1. See, further, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in The Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (NY: Vintage, 2007).

Our plan was to rally everyday Iraqis and their political leaders around their new [Iraqi] security forces. Our command, through the Ministries of Defense and Interior, could show the world Iraqi forces, their motives for serving, how they trained, and how they fought for and protected Iraq. When they died we'd make them, not the insurgents, the martyrs. With our Iraqi counterparts we would show the Arab street that Iraqi forces were more and more taking control of their nation with the support of the coalition, and we would illustrate to Iraq's neighbors that the new Iraqi military was about internal defense and not an instrument of outward aggression. (40)

Such laudable goals were thwarted at almost every turn by American bureaucratic obtuseness or Iraqi intransigence and corruption. The author notes that, first, prior CPA bungling had destroyed the PAOs' credibility. Second, a newly formed Iraqi military hierarchy, obsessed with information control and their own prerogatives, had no interest in engaging with ordinary Iraqis. And, third, even if Iraqis had wanted to speak frankly, the US military did not trust them to say the "right" thing. Efforts to "put an Iraqi face" on the war against the insurgents were ignored or actively undermined, leading Alvarez to conclude, "Fuck, ... we are alone in this and surrounded by a sea of clueless motherfuckers" (53).

Undeterred by "the zero-defect, zero-tolerance, ask-for-permission-to-wipe-your-ass world of PAOs" (61), the author started his own blog (a novelty at the time) focusing on Iraqi reconstruction and revealing the warts and blemishes on the Iraqi "face." The blog proved popular and won the support of General Petraeus, who had charge of the Iraqi training mission. Alvarez tends to lionize Petraeus, who could, for example, juggle "about a trillion things" (69), but they made an effective team. So effective, in fact, that, with Alvarez as his PAO, the energetic general hogged the news spotlight in Iraq (79) and elicited a "gag order" from Gen. George William Casey, commander of the Multinational Force. The resultant seven-month silence, in Alvarez's view, hampered efforts to stand up Iraqi forces as a key element in America's "exit strategy" (84).

Alvarez's own attempts to create a small Iraqi media team were undercut by American distrust and Iraqi corruption, leading him to wonder why "so many people [in the chain of command] ignore[d] the president's wishes and public affairs guidance." He speculates that one motive may have been to deny Petraeus "another *Newsweek* moment" (114). One thing is certain: the United States lost the information war in Iraq because of the dysfunction and confusion that bedeviled the American military's relations with its erstwhile Iraqi partners.

The book reproduces a photograph of Alvarez visiting Iraq's tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Baghdad, where he witnessed "two disrespectful U.S. civilians ... mountain biking down the tomb's steps and all over the memorial while Iraqi facility protection guards watched."² Just imagine the reaction of Americans if the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery were treated so impiously by foreigners, let alone foreign occupiers.

That anecdote raises a question Alvarez fails to address fully: what if the American occupation was not a failure in information warfare? What if the war and its ugly aftermath were simply a case of an unsellable product? When Iraqi leaders were unwilling to recognize forty-nine freshly-minted Iraqi soldiers who had been executed by insurgents as "martyrs to the new Iraq," how could Americans hope to "sell" the virtues of the new Iraqi forces to their countrymen (chap. 7)?

Alvarez in fact provides evidence for an alternative narrative of an undesirable product (the American-led occupation and reconstruction) being hawked by a smiling Iraqi "face" to grimly skeptical and long-suffering Iraqi "buyers." The war, the occupation, and the specious "progress" of US rebuilding efforts had become an outright sham, but one that too many were making money and careers from to protest or replace. Peter Van Buren, a US State Department representative in Iraq, has captured the

2. Caption to number 9 in the book's photo section between pages 128 and 129.

Potemkin village-like quality of many of US reconstruction projects, all of them heavily hyped as successes in the States even as they crashed and burned in Iraq.³

Alvarez did, however, come to recognize Iraq's brutal realities:

My inability to get anything done in Iraq thanks to the international cluster fuck that we had created in Baghdad ... started to take its toll on my morale What had once been sarcastic and comic edginess that I could always use to deflect the stupidity of some PAOs had turned into bitterness. I really fucking hated it there because just beyond all of our headquarters bullshit, miles from our lobster tails, near beer, warm glistening pools, Friday-night parties, shiny medals, false bravado, and ivory towers, our soldiers and Iraqis, women and children, were dying barbaric deaths and nobody seemed to give a shit.... I was no longer part of the failing mission in Iraq. I was the failing mission in Iraq.... The [US] military ignorantly rebukes brave, bold, and independent press groups because it doesn't understand journalism fundamentals and doesn't understand how information, bad and good, can help it communicate its messages. The Defense Department accuses the media of reporting inaccurately, yet it floods the battlefield with incorrect information ... [while] the Arab media don't filter violence for their people. (155-56, 220)

Steven Alvarez's unfiltered account of his personal information war in Iraq demystifies an essential aspect of that war and indeed all wars. *Selling War* is must reading for PAOs, historians of the Iraq war and the modern American military, and indeed anyone interested in war and its perennial first casualty—truth.

3. *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2011).