

What the U.S. is spending to crush Iraq

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The real cost of the war in Iraq.

“IT IS worth it,” George W. Bush told the country last June as he defended the cost—both human and financial—of the U.S. war on Iraq. But according to a new study, the real cost in dollar terms doesn’t even begin to come close to the Bush administration’s original projection.

Banking on a quick military victory, little resistance and the use of Iraq’s oil revenues to finance the occupation, in January 2003, Mitchell Daniels Jr., director of the Office of Management and Budget, told the New York Times that the cost of a war would be in the \$50-60 billion range.

As the war and occupation dragged on, that number went up dramatically. In addition to \$251 billion in congressional appropriations through March 2006, the Congressional Budget Office now says the war will also cost an additional \$230 billion over the next 10 years—for a total price tag of around \$500 billion.

But in a shocking paper published in January, Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and Harvard budget expert Linda Bilmes say that a “moderate” estimate of the direct costs of the war in Iraq will likely be much higher—totaling as much as \$1.2 trillion, assuming that the U.S. begins to withdraw troops this year and continues to every year until 2010. “Like the iceberg that hit the Titanic, the full costs of the war are still largely hidden below the surface,” they explained recently in the Los Angeles Times.

According to Stiglitz and Bilmes, the government’s official estimates don’t take into account

factors like the cost of long-term health care and disability for veterans, the increased cost of replacing military hardware, and re-enlistment bonuses and other enticements to keep the ranks full.

Furthermore, they say, if you add in other “non-direct” costs, like the rise in the price of oil, a bigger U.S. deficit, and the loss to the economy from injured veterans who can’t be as productive, the cost of the war goes beyond the \$2 trillion mark.

AS SHOCKING as the estimated price tag for the U.S. may be, it doesn’t compare to the horrors suffered by ordinary Iraqis.

No economic analysis can convey what farmer Ghadban Nahd Hassan experienced last month, for example, when U.S. pilots bombed his home in the town of Baiji, believing “insurgents” were hiding there. At least 12 of his family members were killed in the attack, which reduced his home to rubble.

This trauma has been experienced many times over—for each of the over 100,000 Iraqi civilians estimated to be killed as a result of the U.S. war in Iraq.

Meanwhile, those who survived the U.S. bombs in Iraq have seen their standard of living—once one of the highest in the Middle East—plummet. Rather than make life better for ordinary Iraqis, electricity, food, clean water and sanitation are all scarce commodities in U.S.-occupied Iraq.

Iraqis now have, on average, less than 12 hours of power each day, and at least half of the population doesn’t have reliable access to clean water or sanitation. As an October report from the U.S. government’s General Accounting Office admitted, almost three years after the fall of Saddam, “it is unclear how U.S. efforts are helping the Iraqi people obtain clean water, reliable electricity or competent health care.”

Of the paltry \$18.4 billion the U.S. allotted to rebuild Iraq, at least half was eaten up, according to the Washington Post, by “the insurgency, a buildup of Iraq’s criminal justice system, and the investigation and trial of Saddam Hussein.”

Malnutrition among Iraqi children has nearly doubled since the U.S. invasion and occupation, affecting one in every dozen children. And under the U.S. occupation, nearly one-quarter of Iraqi children have no access to education, according to the Center for Research on Globalization.

A 2004 report by UNICEF and the Iraqi Ministry of Education found that, since the beginning of the U.S. war on Iraq, some 900 primary schools had been damaged by bombing or burning, and thousands had been looted. As many as 3,700 schools were without a safe water supply, and more than 7,000 lacked an adequate sewage system—a legacy not only of the war, but of more than a decade of U.S.-backed economic sanctions.

Initial reconstruction plans called for the U.S. to repair 3,000 schools in the first six months after the invasion—and another 6,000 within a year. But those numbers were lowered, as the opposition to the U.S. grew and reconstruction money was diverted for “security” purposes.

So while the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) set a modest goal of building 286 schools by the end of 2004, as of September 2005, just 45 new schools had

been constructed.

Likewise, Bechtel Corp.-which received more than \$1 billion to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure, including refurbishing 1,500 schools-reportedly used shoddy subcontractors that left many schools with leaking roofs, broken sewage systems and other problems that left them unusable.

The conclusion is simple, and terrible: The U.S. government is willing to spend more than \$1 trillion to crush Iraq, but can't be bothered to spend even a tiny fraction to keep Iraq's 26 million citizens from going without food, clean water, health care or education.

IN GLOBAL terms, the incredible waste of resources because of the U.S. plunder of Iraq is ever more clear.

According to the United Nations, providing universal access to basic social services to everyone in the world who lacks them-including food, clean water and sanitation, primary education, basic health care and reproductive health care-would cost an additional \$80 billion each year.

In other words, the "conservative" estimate of \$1 trillion in direct costs of the war could bridge the shortfall and meet the basic needs of every person on the planet for more than 12 years.

The money spent to destroy Iraq could be put to good use in the U.S. More than 180 million young people could go to a public college for free for four years for \$1 trillion. Or, it could cover the average salaries of the 4.3 million public school teachers in the U.S. for nearly five years.

Stiglitz and Bilmes make a further point in their report: "While we may not know what causes terrorism, clearly the desperation and despair that comes from the poverty that is rife in so much of the Third World has the potential of providing a fertile feeding ground."

"For sums less than the direct expenditures on the war," they conclude, the U.S. could have provided aid to poor countries "that could have made an enormous difference, for the better, to the well-being of billions today living in poverty."

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