

Bungled budgeting: Investing in Iraq; disinvesting in the U.S.

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Many Democrats in Congress and plenty of other Americans find it hard to stomach President Bush's \$87 billion request for military and reconstruction projects in Iraq and Afghanistan. About \$20 billion of that total is slated for rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure—its highways, schools, houses, hospitals, electricity system, water supply and communications. Those who thought the war in Iraq was ill advised are not happy to be paying for the postwar occupation and reconstruction. And even many who supported the war are upset by the price tag, especially since the Bush administration once maintained—mistakenly—that postwar costs would be covered by the sale of Iraqi oil.

Past mistakes, even big ones, do not justify the bungling of current opportunities. Having disrupted Iraqi society by a preemptive war, launched against the advice of its closest allies, the U.S. is obliged to bring order and security to Iraq. As the saying goes: If you break it, you fix it. Providing Iraqis with tangible improvements in everyday life is crucial to creating political stability there. And creating a stable Iraq is not only in the immediate and long-term interest of the U.S., the region and the world; it is a U.S. responsibility.

Nevertheless, the president's critics are right to make him fight for the money for Iraq. The issue is not whether the U.S. has a huge obligation in Iraq—we think it does—but why the government is investing in Iraqi society when it is relentlessly disinvesting in American society.

Consider: While the emergency spending bill earmarks \$850 million for health care in Iraq, the Bush budget has done nothing to address the 44 million Americans without health insurance. Bush's ten-year budget plan calls for a \$95 billion cut in Medicaid, the government health program for the poor. It also entails an \$8 billion cut in the "No child left behind" education program—supposedly one of Bush's cherished concerns—along with significant cuts in welfare, child care and Head Start

programs. While \$76 million is slated for building a new Iraq army, Bush's ten-year budget entails a \$6 billion cut in programs for U.S. military veterans.

The Bush administration is astonishingly blithe about the fact that its emergency request for Iraq comes at a time of huge deficits and declining funding for domestic programs. The president and his allies in Congress have refused to consider rescinding any of the \$1.8 trillion tax cut that was enacted in the past two years, mostly to benefit the very wealthy. They rejected a proposal to delay by one year the tax cut for people with incomes over \$312,000, which by itself would have provided the \$87 billion needed in Iraq. It's increasingly clear that adding to the deficit and defunding domestic programs are not byproducts of Bush's goals: they constitute his goals. The higher the deficit and the lower the taxes, the harder it will be to fund domestic programs in the future. That means that, by the curious calculus now dominating Washington, investing in the future of Iraqi children will make it that much harder to invest in American children.