

Bush Aggression Makes Life in Iraq “Unbearable”

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President Bush’s attack on Iraq has made daily life there “unbearable” for most people, two prominent American financial authorities write.

“Five years after the United States occupied Iraq with the stated goal of bringing democracy to its people, the war has essentially ruined the country’s economy, society, and sovereignty,” writes Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz with Linda Bilmes in “The Three Trillion Dollar War(W.W. Norton).” Bilmes is a former CFO of the U.S. Commerce Department.

“For most Iraqis, daily life has become unbearable—to the point that those who can afford to leave their country have done so,” Stiglitz and Bilmes say. An estimated two million have done just that, precipitating what the UN calls a “humanitarian crisis,” and two million more have remained in Iraq but have been displaced from their homes.

Many have had no choice but to run. The UN High Commissioner on Refugees said “thousands of the Iraqis are the victims of torture, sexual and gender-based violence, car bombings or other violent attacks and are in urgent need of medical care.”

Estimates of Iraq’s civilian dead run as high as one million, about four percent of the prewar population, with perhaps another two million wounded. Assuming these estimates, the authors put the cost to Iraq society at a stunning \$8.6 trillion, dwarfing the \$3 trillion cost figure they assert is a reasonable estimate of the cost of the Iraq war to American society.

In reckoning the cost of Iraq’s agony, Stiglitz and Bilmes include 7,700 Iraqi soldiers that elected to fight with the Americans and were killed, and an estimated 15,000 more wounded. The number of Iraqi troops slain is roughly twice that of all U.S. military killed in Iraq.

As the war ruined Iraq’s economy, unemployment soared and incomes plummeted. As for Iraq’s middle class, the term the authors use to describe it now is “destroyed.” After all, you can’t have a middle class when between 25 and 40 percent of the male work force is unemployed. According to MIT philosopher Noam Chomsky, in the first year of the war, median income of Iraqis plunged from \$255 to \$144.

In his book “Failed States”(Metropolitan/Owl), Chomsky said that within 16 months of the invasion, acute malnutrition doubled “so that roughly 400,000 Iraqi children are suffering from a “wasting condition characterized by chronic diarrhea and dangerous deficiencies of protein.” Not surprising when the UN’s World Food Program found “significant countrywide shortages of rice, sugar, milk, and infant formula.”

Stiglitz and Bilmes say many Iraqis have become ill or died “because Iraq’s economy was destroyed and no adequate relief program was put in place.” One of the symptoms of the deteriorating living conditions has been an outbreak of cholera associated with tainted water or food supplies, or a breakdown in sanitation and hygiene practices. Half of Iraq’s children are not attending school because many are too sick to do so.

Stiglitz and Bilmes believe, “Miserable though Saddam Hussein’s regime was, life is actually worse for the Iraqi people now. The country’s roads, schools, hospitals, homes, and museums have been destroyed and its citizens have less access to electricity and water than before the war. Sectarian violence is rife. Iraq’s chaos has made the country a magnet for terrorists of all stripes.”

“The quality of life in Iraq,” the authors continue, “measured by the lack of electricity, the high unemployment numbers, the mass exodus from the country, the huge numbers displaced within the country, the collapse of the middle class, and the soaring violence, suggests that, beyond the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi people have seen little good come of the war. Apart from America’s oil and defense industries, it is hard to find any real winners.”

Among the losers have been Iraqi workers. With more than one out of two Iraqi men out of work at some point after the invasion, Iraqis were begging for work. “But American contractors focused on minimizing their labor costs, and imported workers from Nepal and other low-wage countries who were cheaper than Iraqis,” Stiglitz and Bilmes wrote.

Who is surprised that the “real winners” of the war are the U.S. oil companies reaping fabulous profits and U.S. military-industrial contractors such as Halliburton gorging themselves on no-bid contracts? The \$100 a month every American household is shelling out for the war is definitely not going to the Iraqi people.

After all the death and destruction the U.S. has visited upon Iraq, it seems incredible that U.S. politicians can argue Iraq should finance its own reconstruction! If there is any justice in the world, America and its Coalition allies that made this hell on earth will indemnify Iraq in full for the loss of life and property it sustained. For starters, why not pass the plate to those defense contractors and oil companies?

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