

\$87 Billion Well Spent

The Bush administration is asking Congress for an \$87 billion appropriation to cover near-term troop deployment and reconstruction costs in Iraq. Let's stipulate a few things about that request right off the bat:

One: Foreign aid is politically unpopular.

Two: Any large appropriation request, foreign or domestic, contains individual line items that can easily be made to look extravagant or outright ridiculous.

Three: Occupation and reconstruction efforts in Iraq have been pursued with a mixture of competence and clumsiness, ingenuity and bureaucracy, efficiency and, presumably, some wastefulness.

Four: The Bush administration, with a weird combination of defensiveness and dogmatism, has made its case poorly of late. What's more, Donald Rumsfeld's congressional relations are an ongoing disaster. Colin Powell has been preoccupied with the United Nations. And the White House was caught unawares while resistance to the spending plan was growing within the GOP.

Five: Every serious foreign policy expert in the Democratic party privately agrees that Congress should pass the administration's full supplemental request for Iraq, and soon. But, although so advised by these very same experts, every serious Democratic presidential candidate (Joe Lieberman honorably excepted) is bobbing and weaving on the question, or worse. And the Democratic congressional leadership is demagoguing the matter. And Democratic-leaning columnists are biting their tongues about the spectacle (the *New Republic's* Peter Beinart honorably excepted; Beinart calls Democratic criticism of the supplemental "dishonest and opportunistic").

Six: As for Republican and conservative resistance to the appropriation, some of it is earnest, if misguided. But

some of it is neo-isolationism wearing a green-eyeshade disguise. And some of it is just silly. Why should certain conservatives suddenly mount an old-fashioned "government waste" crusade against, of all things, administration proposals for postwar Iraq—where success is, by general consensus, a national imperative? Because, we suppose, certain conservatives are often their own worst enemies.

Congressional complaints about the price tag for Iraq's reconstruction are unjustified—and unenlightened. They are unjustified insofar as they pretend to be concern over details of policy and procedure. Modernizing Iraq's electrical grid is not a project best administered from Capitol Hill; it is the executive branch that has the people on the ground over there, and at some basic level those people have got to be trusted to get things right.

Moreover, and more fundamentally, there's got to be an understanding that this particular funding request—like the removal of Saddam in the first place—is an absolutely necessary initiative in America's campaign against global terrorism.

The Bush administration has repeatedly asserted the centrality of Iraq to the broader war on terror. We agree, and have been saying so for two years, and we will not rehearse the argument here. Instead, we urge the president to rehearse it, in his own voice, and with sufficient force and clarity to persuade (or at least remind) the country that this is a single war, in Iraq and beyond—and it is a war that we absolutely have to win.

We direct our advice to the president personally because, apparently, he can't expect much reinforcement from his cabinet. Though Secretary Rumsfeld was effective in his congressional testimony defending the administration's funding request last week, he took a third of

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the *Washington Post's* op-ed page not to further that defense but rather to reassure people (implausibly) that "nation-building" wasn't the point of the exercise. Real men don't nation-build, see: What we want to do is merely help the natives help themselves. Yes, Rumsfeld is right that self-rule should be restored to Iraq sooner


rather than later—and that criticism of American occupation policy from the U.N., which still runs Kosovo like a plantation colony four years after the fighting there ended, is the rankest hypocrisy. But it is precisely the goal of Iraqi self-rule in the future that demands generous and energetic U.S. action in the present.

As for Secretary of State Powell . . . well, he had a meeting with the *New York Times* editorial board last Thursday. As the *Times* described it, Powell was "asked whether Americans would have supported this war if weapons of mass destruction had not been at issue, [and] Mr. Powell said the question was too hypothetical to answer." Then Powell was asked whether "he, personally, would have supported it." Whereupon "he smiled, thrust his hand out and said, 'It was good to meet you.'"

Even allowing for a maximum degree of tendentiousness in the *Times's* account, this is pretty unsettling. So little does the secretary of state share his president's view of things, it seems, that Powell cannot bring himself to reiterate either the Middle East-specific strategic case—or the broader U.S. political-and-moral-leadership case—for deposing Saddam Hussein. Small wonder the administration is having problems.

Well, George W. Bush's foreign policy has always been his own, not his cabinet's. Now he needs to summon the gumption and skill to bring that policy through a particularly crucial rough patch. We're with him. It would be nice if conservatives outside government, and subordinates throughout the executive branch, and Republicans serving in Congress were doing a little more to help.

—William Kristol



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