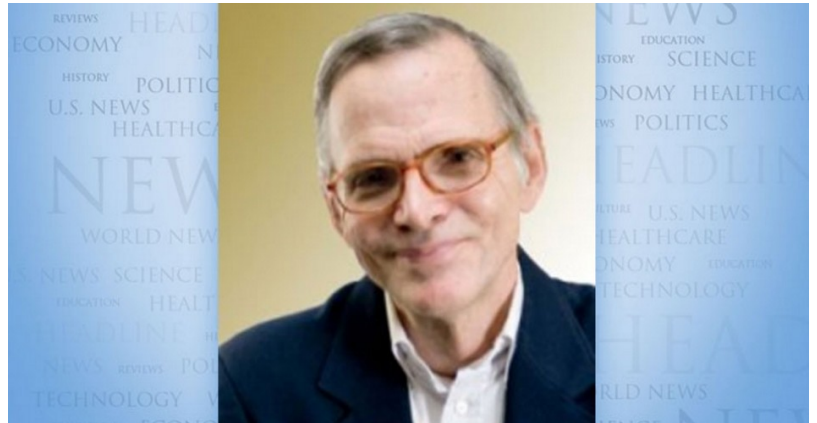




Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on March 8, 2013

## Inspector General's Iraq Report Misses the Point

This week's news of a [report](#) by the Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction raised some eyebrows and maybe some hackles among the taxpaying American public before falling down the memory hole. The numbers will soon be forgotten: At least \$8 billion of the more than \$60 billion spent on Iraq reconstruction over a nine-year period was wasted, according to Inspector General Stuart W. Bowen, Jr.



Few adults could be surprised at that, since it is such an old and oft-repeated story. No doubt some will retain a vague memory of something about bad planning, inadequate oversight, and the old bugaboo, "fraud, waste, and abuse." Chances are many Americans shook their heads and wondered: Can't our government do anything right?

But the effort to do something right begs what should be the prior question of whether the "something" our government is attempting to do should be done by the government at all. That is precisely where we generally find conservatives in America sitting on both sides of the fence. They are opposed to "big government" programs aimed at rebuilding the infrastructure and revitalizing the economy here at home. But they appear quite content to lavish billions of dollars on a foreign government's attempt to do the same thing. They rail against ObamaCare's "one size fits all" approach to healthcare, but seem convinced that Western-style "democracy" is the paradigm for nations everywhere, and most definitely in the Middle East, where people have no experience of it and few show a desire for it. It is as alien to their traditions and culture as Sharia law is to ours.

Our domestic conservatives denounce bureaucratic dictates from distant Washington and say the government that works best is the one closest to the people. Then they attempt to govern people of a different culture, half a world away. They denounce military aggression, but embrace a doctrine of preventive war.

And once our nation followed the "Bush doctrine" into war with Iraq, repairing the damage inflicted on that nation was inevitable, notwithstanding that opposition to "nation building" was a consistent [theme](#) of the George W. Bush's election campaign in 2000. "If we don't stop extending our troops all around the world in nation-building missions," Bush said in a debate with Vice President Al Gore, "we're going to have a problem coming down the road and I'm going to prevent that."

But then 2001 came along and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 "changed everything," many believed. It certainly changed Bush's belief, also expressed in his campaign for the White House, that the United States, while remaining strong and standing for freedom, should be, at the same time, a ["humble nation."](#)

It is doubtful the world can stand, or the United States can afford, much more of the "humility" our nation has practiced since then. Hubris, far more than humility, characterizes a super power's self-proclaimed right and even duty to invade and occupy any nation it believes poses or harbors a potential threat to the superpower's security. The harm to the United States from potential threats is theoretical. The harm we have done other nations in pursuing the Bush doctrine has been actual, deadly, and



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devastating.

Having seen, on an almost daily basis, examples of how our trillion-dollar-a-year government spends money here at home, the waste of a mere \$8 billion over nine years in Iraq might seem to some Americans a real bargain by comparison. Yet that is a drop in the bucket of blood that has been spilled in Iraq, much of it at the hands of those who arrived there as soldiers of an invading army — ours.

Nearly 5,000 American service personnel and hundreds of civilian contractors died in that war. By a conservative estimate, 100,000 Iraqis were killed and the number left homeless by the war's devastation numbered — and may still number — in the millions. All that from an enterprise our government called "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

Long gone and nearly forgotten are the days when U.S. officials were predicting a cakewalk in Iraq. To be sure, the conquest of Baghdad was quick and relatively easy. But the answer to the question, "then what?" was learned at a great cost to the United States and to Iraq. The reconstruction costs are but an add-on to the bill for a war that some economists claim will cost [\\$3 trillion](#) when the costs of reconstruction, of burying our dead, and caring for our maimed and wounded are added to the cost of waging the war itself.

"We tax the American people to bomb bridges in Iraq," Congressman Ron Paul (R-Texas) pointed out in his presidential campaign in 2008. Then more U.S. dollars are spent to repair the bridges we've bombed. "Meanwhile our bridges are falling apart."

Somehow those costs escaped the farsighted vision of the dot-com warriors at their desks in Washington, the newspaper pundits and talk radio hosts who never gave the war drums a rest in the days, weeks, and months leading to the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The war was going to pay for itself in oil revenue, and increased trade and foreign investment in Iraq, remember?

"If we do Iraq, we'll rebuild it," Rush Limbaugh confidently predicted. How has that been working out for us? How well has it worked for the people of Iraq, who still have sewage flowing in their streets because we have not yet rebuilt wastewater treatment plants that work? How prescient was the analysis offered in March 2003, when Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz [said](#) that in Iraq, we were "really dealing with a country that could finance its own reconstruction."

The reconstruction program in Iraq is the second longest in U.S. history, exceeded only by the ongoing rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. No one knows how many more reconstruction projects are in our nation's future. The Inspector General's report listed seven lessons to be learned from the reconstruction to date, apparently to be applied in future occupations:

- Create a civilian-military office for rebuilding activities.
- Start rebuilding only after having established sufficient security.
- Ensure full participation and cost-sharing with the host country.
- Establish uniform contracting and personnel rules for all projects.
- Require oversight of all projects from the beginning.
- Refine the programs that did work in Iraq.
- Plan ahead with back-up plans at the ready.

If only we could take all the planning, all the controls, and all the oversight and regulation that have



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worked so well in government projects here at home (Do the words “cost overrun” ring a bell?) and export them to other lands far away, they might finally work. But those who take a less expansive view of our government’s role in the world might recall George W. Bush’s former aversion to “nation building” and his vision of America as a “humble nation.”

Iraq, judging by current reports of life after the Bush wars, remains under thug rule, albeit under a different gang of thugs. They have serious shortages of safe drinking water, electricity, genuine security, and, our “liberation” notwithstanding, they suffer from a severe lack of freedom. The next time a president of the United States calls for an “operation” for someone else’s freedom, with the inevitable reconstruction to follow, we might better forget the Inspector General’s seven lessons and instead learn and remember just one:

*Don’t do it!*



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