



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 29, 2010

Afghanistan Reconstruction: Billions Spent, But No One Knows Just How

In Iraq, for example, the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction found [over \\$5 billion had been wasted on various projects](#), including hundreds of abandoned or incomplete projects such as a \$40 million prison, a \$5.7 million convention center, and a roughly \$100 million wastewater treatment plant. In addition, the special inspector general discovered that the Pentagon [could not account for over 95 percent of \\$9.1 billion in Iraqi funds](#) set aside for reconstruction.



To no one's great surprise, the situation in Afghanistan, site of another undeclared U.S. war, is no better. David Francis of the *Fiscal Times* reports:

In its bid to win the hearts and minds of Afghanistan's teeming population, the United States has spent more than \$55 billion to rebuild and bolster the war-ravaged country. That money was meant to cover everything from the construction of government buildings and economic development projects to the salaries of U.S. government employees working closely with Afghans.

Yet no one can say with any authority or precision how that money was spent and who profited from it. Most of the funds were funneled to a vast array of U.S. and foreign contractors. But according to a recent audit by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), there is no way of knowing whether the money went for the intended purposes.

"The audit shows that navigating the confusing labyrinth of government contracting is difficult, at best," SIGAR said in releasing the audit. "USAID, the State Department and the Pentagon are unable to readily report on how much money they spend on contracting for reconstruction activities in Afghanistan."

The reason for these agencies' inability to say where taxpayers' money is going is simply that the government hasn't demanded any sort of accountability from its recipients. "The money," Francis writes, "flows from Washington to Afghanistan, with little oversight and accountability, and at every step along the way someone else takes a cut."

It doesn't help that much of the work being performed in Afghanistan under the auspices of the U.S. government is actually being contracted out. Private contractors make up 57 percent of the workforce employed by the Department of Defense in that country, "the highest recorded percentage of contractors used by DOD in any conflict in the history of the United States," according to a July Congressional Research Service report. With only 14 percent of those contractors being U.S. citizens, holding them accountable for their expenditures of American dollars is extremely difficult. The result, according to Francis:



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As staggering amounts of U.S. tax dollars virtually vanish down a black hole, many of the government projects designed to foster improved relations with the Afghan people and undermine the appeal of the Taliban have fallen far behind schedule or simply aren't completed. In October, SIGAR found that six Afghan National Police buildings were so poorly built that they are unusable. They were constructed at a cost of \$5 million by Basirat Construction, an Afghan construction company.

Another report found that the United States has spent nearly \$200 million on Afghan security service buildings that cannot be used. SIGAR also found that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) couldn't account for nearly \$18 billion that was paid to some 7,000 U.S. and Afghan contractors for development projects. Afghan contractors often pay kickbacks to local warlords, like Ahmad Wali Karzai, the president's brother and the so-called "King of Kandahar." Their actions often undermine the work of the coalition.

U.S. officials' failure to grasp certain Afghan cultural realities also figures into the problem. "Earlier this summer," says Francis, "coalition forces cleared Malajat, a longstanding Taliban stronghold in the eastern flatlands just outside of Kandahar City. But after they were forced out in September, many of the residents of Malajat remained sympathetic to the Taliban's cause."

Thinking that the solution was to be found in giving residents a place to talk to the central government they largely despise as a U.S. puppet, the Canadian and U.S. governments then began to construct four buildings in Malajat for locals to air their grievances with the Hamid Karzai regime. Afghan contractors were hired to construct the buildings in September; but, according to Francis, "as of early November, Afghans earning about a dollar a day had only dug holes for the foundation of the building complex, which was optimistically scheduled to be completed by July." Given that, as Francis explains, "most Afghans do little work in the winter months," the project is virtually assured to run very late — and well over budget: "Despite numerous inquiries, U.S. and Canadian officials could not estimate the cost of the project."

Of course, there are still those who think government projects can be made to work. Among them is Gen. David Petraeus, who wrote in a September memorandum, "With proper oversight, contracting can spur economic development and support the Afghan government and NATO's campaign objectives." And why not? The government's "stimulus" has done wonders for the U.S. economy and the Obama administration's campaign objectives.

Even in a narrowly defined, congressionally declared war, waste and corruption would occur. In an ill-defined, open-ended, undeclared war, they are almost guaranteed to be out of control, as they have been in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Afghans' hearts and minds are not going to be won over by Federal Reserve Notes. They will be won over only when America departs the "graveyard of empires" and returns to the foreign policy of the Founding Fathers: "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliances with none."



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