



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 30, 2010

Boondoggles in Baghdad, Basra, and Beyond

Your tax dollars at work, as reported by the Associated Press: “As the U.S. draws down in Iraq, it is leaving behind hundreds of abandoned or incomplete projects. More than \$5 billion in American taxpayer funds has been wasted — more than 10 percent of the some \$50 billion the U.S. has spent on reconstruction in Iraq, according to audits from a U.S. watchdog agency.”



The AP admits this is “likely an underestimate, based on an analysis of more than 300 reports by auditors with the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction” and does not account for “security costs, which have run almost 17 percent for some projects.” (The special inspector general, by the way, has also [found](#) that the Pentagon could account for almost none of the Iraqi money with which it was entrusted for rebuilding purposes.)

Though the AP hastens to mention some “success stories” from the rebuilding — such as the construction of police stations, border forts, and government buildings; the improvement in Iraqi security forces; and the restoration of a deep water port — it points out that “even completed projects for the most part fell far short of original goals.”

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None of this should come as a surprise to even a casual observer of government. Government building projects, whether at home or abroad, invariably run late and well over budget and frequently result in less-than-top-quality construction. Usually they are initiated for political reasons, and the contracts for the construction go to those with the most political connections. That the projects in Iraq were created under the rubric of U.S. national defense makes no difference in all this. In fact, their taking place in a remote location where officials in Washington and voters across the country could hardly monitor them only made such waste and poor results more likely.

As usual, when government fails, it blames the people it is supposed to be serving, not itself. Thus, Col. Jon Christensen, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region District, “acknowledged that mistakes have been made,” according to the AP. “But he said ... the success of the program will depend ultimately on the Iraqis.”

Christensen told the AP, “There’s only so much we could do. A lot of it comes down to them taking ownership of it.”

The Iraqis, for their part, say that they were not consulted about what projects should be undertaken and now lament the fact that they are being saddled with the cost of completing and maintaining



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facilities for which they have little use.

In its report the AP cites several egregious examples of U.S. taxpayer-funded boondoggles in Iraq. The first is a prison between Baghdad and Khan Bani Saad. “In March 2004,” says the report, “the Corps of Engineers awarded a \$40 million contract to global construction and engineering firm Parsons Corp. to design and build a prison for 3,600 inmates” to finish in November 2005. (It’s worth asking why Iraq’s self-styled liberators felt a pressing need to build yet another prison in the desert.)

Because of violence in the area, continues the AP, “the project started six months late and continued to fall behind schedule.” Eventually, the U.S. government took the project away from Parsons in June 2006 “but later awarded three more contracts to other companies,” according to the report. Finally the U.S. abandoned the project — and \$1.2 million in unused construction material — in June 2007 and turned over the unfinished facility to the Iraqi government, which refused to do anything at all with the building. The inspector general called it “forty million dollars wasted in the desert.”

Americans were soaked to the tune of \$5.7 million for a convention center inside the Baghdad International Airport compound. Although the center has hosted a handful of events, the AP writes that “the contracts awarded for the halls did not include requirements to connect them to the main power supply.” The facility was handed over to the Iraqi government on January 20, whereupon precisely nothing was done to complete or maintain it. The AP describes the current condition of the complex:

The buildings have since fallen into disrepair, and dozens of boxes of fluorescent lightbulbs and other equipment disappeared from the site. Light poles outside have toppled over and the glass facade is missing from large sections of the abandoned buildings.

Another boondoggle is the Fallujah wastewater treatment plant. The contract was awarded “just three months after four American private security contractors were savagely attacked” in that city, according to the report. Not surprisingly, the contractor wasn’t able to accomplish much in such a security environment.

The AP reports on the present state of the project:

The Fallujah waste water treatment system is nearly complete — four years past the deadline, at a cost of more than three times the original \$32.5 million estimate. It has been scaled back to serve just a third of the population, and Iraqi officials said it still lacks connections to houses and a pipe to join neighborhood tanks up with the treatment plant.

Desperate residents, meanwhile, have begun dumping their sewage in the tanks, causing foul odors and running the risk of seepage, according to the head of Fallujah’s municipal council, Sheik Hameed Ahmed Hashim.

“It isn’t appropriate for the Americans to give the city these services without completing these minor details,” Hashim said. “We were able to wipe out part of the memories of the Fallujah battles through this and other projects.... If they leave the project as it is, I think their reputation will be damaged.”

Finally, there is the allegedly “state of the art” children’s hospital in Basra. Scheduled for completion in December 2005 at a cost of about \$50 million, the hospital is still not open — it was recently completed but could not open because of a lack of electricity — and has cost over \$165 million. The Iraqi government has already downgraded the building from “state of the art” to a “modern pediatric hospital.”

Basra resident Ghassan Khadim told the AP, “It is the duty of the Americans to do such projects because



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they were the ones who inflicted harm on the people.”

Khadim is certainly correct about the harm inflicted on Iraqis by the U.S. government. And while one is tempted to agree that the same government has a responsibility to rebuild the country its military destroyed, the fact is that such an effort inflicts a double evil on the American people, who are forced to pay for both destroying and rebuilding a country that never even threatened them in the first place. Still, the Iraqis’ frustration is understandable, and since Americans were forced to fund such projects, one wishes the projects would at least be successful.

With U.S. troops, spies, and other government advisers remaining in Iraq, Afghanistan, and various other far-flung parts of the globe, Americans can expect to see more stories of waste, fraud, and corruption from their government’s nation-building projects for years to come. The only surefire way to prevent them is to bring the troops home and mind our own business, a plan of action that also happens to be constitutional and will greatly assist in securing “the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

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