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The Opportunity Costs of the Iraq War

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The Iraq war continues to be a drain on the American taxpayers' pocketbooks. So far, the war has cost the United States \$144.4 billion, including \$25 billion in the Administration's FY05 defense budget signed into law earlier this month. An additional \$60 billion is expected in a supplemental request after the November elections. According to the Defense Department, the cost of containing Saddam Hussein over 12 years was only \$30 billion.

While no one disputes the evil and oppressive nature of Saddam Hussein's regime, as the 9/11 Commission made clear in its final report, Iraq was not involved in the planning or execution of the September 11 attacks and did not have a "collaborative operational relationship," according to its final report. The September 11 attacks necessitated an increase in homeland security funding – the Administration's request for the coming fiscal year is \$47.5 billion. However, according to the Center for American Progress, many homeland security priorities are presently under-funded or unfunded – port security, airline cargo screening and community policing programs.

More could be done to better secure or eliminate nuclear weapons, material and technology to prevent terrorists from developing and exploding nuclear or dirty bombs. While progress is being made in Afghanistan, increased aid faster will give democracy its best chance of taking hold and help eliminate the flourishing drug trade in Afghanistan that funds global terrorist activities. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken their toll on our troops. A larger Army and more special operations forces would take some of the current strain off the National Guard and reserves and improve the military's ability to eliminate actual terrorist safe havens in the future. These are just a few proposals that would have represented a better investment in America's security than the \$144.4 billion Iraq "war of choice."

The question lingers: Could the \$144.4 billion spent on Iraq been better used to protect the American people from terrorist threats? The Center for American Progress offers this answer.

- **\$7.5 billion to safeguard our ports.** The Coast Guard estimates that \$7.5 billion is needed *over ten years* to implement the requirements of the 2002 Maritime Transportation Security Act, which aims to protect America's ports and waterways from a terrorist attack. Since 9/11, the federal government has allocated less than \$500 million to counter this threat.

- **\$4 billion to expedite upgrading the Coast Guard fleet.** This investment *over the next five years* would cut in half the 20-year timetable for replacing and upgrading the Coast Guard's fleet of cutters, patrol aircraft, and communications equipment.
 - **\$2 billion to improve cargo security.** This would help cover costs associated with the Cargo Security Initiative, which deploys customs inspectors to ports around the world to screen cargo before it goes to the United States.
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- **\$10 billion to protect all U.S. commercial airliners from shoulder-fired missiles.** These systems, based on existing military technology, would help reduce the danger from the estimated 100,000 shoulder-fired missiles circulating in the world's black markets.
 - **\$5 billion to purchase state-of-the-art baggage screening machines.** This would fulfill the Congressional mandate to install in all commercial airports new systems that integrate baggage screening and baggage handling. Only eight of the nation's 440 airports have the new machines, and the administration has requested only \$250 million for equipment this year.
 - **\$240 million to equip the airports with walk-through explosive detectors.** According to the 9/11 commission, it's still too easy for passengers with hidden explosives to make it through airport security.
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- **\$7 billion to put 100,000 police officers the nation's streets.** \$7 billion would fully fund *for five years* the 1996 Community Oriented Policing Services program, which was designed to put 100,000 new community police officers on America's streets. The administration has cut the funding for the program to \$97 million in the proposed FY05 budget.
 - **\$2.5 billion to increase funding for fire departments.** This would double the size of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program for *each of the next five years*. President Bush requested only \$500 million for FY05, a drop from \$750 million in FY04. Money from the program goes for trucks, protective clothing, hoses, and other equipment.
 - **\$350 million for integrating emergency radio systems nationwide.** Equipment to patch together existing police, fire, and other public safety radio systems throughout the country would cost \$350 million.
 - **\$3 billion to secure major roads and rails.** \$3 billion would secure all the major roads and railways in the nation's largest metropolitan areas. Improving surveillance, training railway workers, and developing new explosive detection equipment would increase passenger safety. The administration has focused its funding on aviation security, but has provided less than \$200 million in last year's budget.
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- **\$30.5 billion to secure from theft the world's nuclear weapons-grade material.** Securing the world's fissile material would enormously reduce the chance that lethal weapons-grade material could be made into nuclear and radiological weapons. A *10-year* \$30 billion program would ensure material security and weapon dismantlement in the

former Soviet Union. Another \$500 million would fund a “global cleanout program,” aimed at removing dangerous nuclear materials from the most vulnerable nuclear sites worldwide.

- **\$2.25 billion to expedite the work of the Nunn-Lugar Threat Reduction program.** Doubling this program’s budget each year *for the next five years* would accelerate Nunn-Lugar, which has helped deactivate over 6,000 nuclear warheads in the former Soviet Union and the United States. The FY04 Defense budget provided only \$450 million for the program.
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- **\$24 billion to add two divisions to the Army.** With commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. Army is increasingly stretched thin. Two additional divisions could be added to the Army *over the next five years* at a cost of \$4.8 billion a year. A larger army would help take the pressure off America’s overtapped National Guardsmen and Reservists.
 - **\$15.5 billion to double the number of active-duty troops in the Special Operations Forces.** The United States has roughly 25,000 Special Operations Forces. These elite military fighting units played a critical role in Afghanistan and continue to be highly effective in tracking down terrorists. Doubling the 25,000 troops in the Special Operations Forces would cost \$7 billion and an additional \$8.5 billion would help maintain the new forces *over the next five years*.
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- **\$8.6 billion to rebuild Afghanistan.** The government of Afghanistan has said it needs \$27.6 billion for reconstruction activities *over the next seven years* such as rebuilding infrastructure, education, health, and disarmament programs. The country has received to date only \$2.9 billion of the \$19 billion pledged by the international community. \$8.6 billion *over the next seven years* would make up this shortfall and help Afghanistan from reverting to a haven for terrorists.
 - **\$11 billion to buy Afghanistan’s opium crop.** Afghanistan’s illicit opium drug trade brings in a profit of \$2.3 billion each year, much of which goes to fund terrorist activities. A *5-year program* to buy Afghanistan’s opium crop would provide initial and continuing funding for farmers to permanently shift from growing opium to cultivating other crops or starting microenterprises.
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- **\$10 billion to increase U.S. development assistance to the neediest countries.** The current foreign assistance budget is \$19.27 billion, including foreign military funding and the State Department’s operating budget. \$13.8 billion goes to countries other than Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan. Increasing the non-military development assistance budget by \$10 billion *over the next five years* to countries other than Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan, would help improve economic opportunities, health care, and education worldwide.
- **\$775 million to dramatically increase public diplomacy.** \$775 million would quadruple America’s public diplomacy efforts in the Arab and Muslim world, as well as triple funding for the National Endowment for Democracy, each year *for the next five*

years. The United States could use this funding to build bridges in Arab and Muslim communities and nations.

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