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## It's a Scam!: The American Way of War in the Twenty-First Century

By Tom Engelhardt  
November 12, 2015

Let's begin with the \$12 billion in shrink-wrapped \$100 bills, Iraqi oil money held in the U.S. The Bush administration began flying it into Baghdad on C-130s soon after U.S. troops entered that city in April 2003. Essentially dumped into the void that had once been the Iraqi state, at least \$1.2 to \$1.6 billion of it was stolen and ended up years later in a mysterious bunker in Lebanon. And that's just what happened as the starting gun went off.

It's never ended. In 2011, the final report of the congressionally mandated Commission on Wartime Contracting estimated that somewhere between \$31 billion and \$60 billion taxpayer dollars had been lost to fraud and waste in the American "reconstruction" of Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, for instance, there was that \$75 million police academy, initially hailed "as crucial to U.S. efforts to prepare Iraqis to take control of the country's security." It was, however, so poorly constructed that it proved a health hazard. In 2006, "feces and urine rained from the ceilings in [its] student barracks" and that was only the beginning of its problems.

When the bad press started, Parsons Corporation, the private contractor that built it, agreed to fix it for nothing more than the princely sum already paid. A year later, a *New York Times* reporter visited and found that "the ceilings are still stained with excrement, parts of the structures are crumbling, and sections of the buildings are unusable because the toilets are filthy and nonfunctioning." This seems to have been par for the course. Typically enough, the Khan Bani

Saad Correctional Facility, a \$40 million prison Parsons also contracted to build, was never even finished.

And these were hardly isolated cases or problems specific to Iraq. Consider, for instance, those police stations in Afghanistan believed to be crucial to “standing up” a new security force in that country. Despite the money poured into them and endless cost overruns, many were either never completed or never built, leaving new Afghan police recruits camping out. And the police were hardly alone. Take the \$3.4 million unfinished teacher-training center in Sheberghan, Afghanistan, that an Iraqi company was contracted to build (using, of course, American dollars) and from which it walked away, money in hand.

And why stick to buildings, when there were those Iraqi roads to nowhere paid for by American dollars? At least one of them did at least prove useful to insurgent groups moving their guerrillas around (like the \$37 million bridge the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built between Afghanistan and Tajikistan that helped facilitate the region’s booming drug trade in opium and heroin). In Afghanistan, Highway 1 between the capital Kabul and the southern city of Kandahar, unofficially dubbed the “highway to nowhere,” was so poorly constructed that it began crumbling in its first Afghan winter.

And don’t think that this was an aberration. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) hired an American nonprofit, International Relief and Development (IRD), to oversee an ambitious road-building program meant to gain the support of rural villagers. Almost \$300 million later, it could point to “less than 100 miles of gravel road completed.” Each mile of road had, by then, cost U.S. taxpayers \$2.8 million, instead of the expected \$290,000, while a quarter of the road-building funds reportedly went directly to IRD for administrative and staff costs. Needless to say, as the road program failed, USAID hired IRD to oversee other non-transportation projects.

In these years, the cost of reconstruction never stopped growing. In 2011, McClatchy News reported that “U.S. government funding for at least 15 large-scale programs and projects grew from just over \$1 billion to nearly \$3 billion despite the government’s questions about their effectiveness or cost.”

### **The Gas Station to Nowhere**

So much construction and reconstruction – and so many failures. There was the chicken-processing plant built in Iraq for \$2.58 million that, except in a few Potemkin-Village-like moments, never plucked a chicken and sent it to market. There was the sparkling new, 64,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art, \$25 million headquarters for the U.S. military in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, that doubled in cost as it was being built and that three generals tried to stop. They were overruled because Congress had already allotted the money for it, so why not spend it, even though it would never be used? And don’t forget the \$20 million that went into constructing roads and utilities for the base that was to hold it, or the \$8.4 billion that went into Afghan opium-poppy-suppression and anti-drug programs and resulted in... bumper poppy crops and record opium yields, or the aid funds that somehow made their way directly into the hands of the Taliban (reputedly its second-largest funding source after those poppies).

There were the billions of dollars in aid that no one could account for, and a significant percentage of the 465,000 small arms (rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, and the like) that the U.S. shipped to Afghanistan and simply lost track of. Most recently, there was the Task Force for Business Stability Operations, an \$800-million Pentagon project to help jump-start the Afghan economy. It was shut down only six months ago and yet, in response to requests from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the Pentagon swears that there are “no Defense Department personnel who can answer questions about” what the task force did with its money. As *ProPublica*’s Megan McCloskey writes, “The Pentagon’s claims are particularly surprising since Joseph Catalino, the former acting director of the task force who was with the program for two years, is still employed by the Pentagon as Senior Advisor for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism.”

Still, from that pile of unaccountable taxpayer dollars, one nearly \$43 million chunk did prove traceable to a single project: the building of a compressed natural gas station. (The cost of constructing a similar gas station in neighboring Pakistan: \$300,000.) Located in an area that seems to have had no infrastructure for delivering natural gas and no cars converted for the use of such fuel, it represented the only example on record in those years of a gas station to nowhere.

All of this just scratches the surface when it comes to the piles of money that were poured into an increasingly privatized version of the American way of war and, in the form of overcharges and abuses of every sort, often simply disappeared into the pockets of the warrior corporations that entered America’s war zones. In a sense, a surprising amount of the money that the Pentagon and U.S. civilian agencies “invested” in Iraq and Afghanistan never left the United States, since it went directly into the coffers of those companies.

Clearly, Washington had gone to war like a drunk on a bender, while the domestic infrastructure began to fray. At \$109 billion by 2014, the American reconstruction program in Afghanistan was already, in today’s dollars, larger than the Marshall Plan (which helped put all of devastated Western Europe back on its feet after World War II) and still the country was a shambles. In Iraq, a mere \$60 billion was squandered on the failed rebuilding of the country. Keep in mind that none of this takes into account the staggering billions spent by the Pentagon in both countries to build strings of bases, ranging in size from American towns (with all the amenities of home) to tiny outposts. There would be 505 of them in Iraq and at least 550 in Afghanistan. Most were, in the end, abandoned, dismantled, or sometimes simply looted. And don’t forget the vast quantities of fuel imported into Afghanistan to run the U.S. military machine in those years, some of which was siphoned off by American soldiers, to the tune of at least \$15 million, and sold to local Afghans on the sly.

In other words, in the post-9/11 years, “reconstruction” and “war” have really been euphemisms for what, in other countries, we would recognize as a massive system of corruption.

And let’s not forget another kind of “reconstruction” then underway. In both countries, the U.S. was creating enormous militaries and police forces essentially from scratch to the tune of at least \$25 billion in Iraq and \$65 billion in Afghanistan. What’s striking about both of these security forces, once constructed, is how similar they turned out to be to those police academies, the unfinished schools, and that natural gas station. It can’t be purely coincidental that both of the

forces Americans proudly “stood up” have turned out to be the definition of corrupt: that is, they were filled not just with genuine recruits but with serried ranks of “ghost personnel.”

In June 2014, after whole divisions of the Iraqi army collapsed and fled before modest numbers of Islamic State militants, abandoning much of their weaponry and equipment, it became clear that they had been significantly smaller in reality than on paper. And no wonder, as that army had enlisted 50,000 “ghost soldiers” (who existed only on paper and whose salaries were lining the pockets of commanders and others). In Afghanistan, the U.S. is still evidently helping to pay for similarly stunning numbers of phantom personnel, though no specific figures are available. (In 2009, an estimated more than 25% of the police force consisted of such ghosts.) As John Sopko, the U.S. inspector general for Afghanistan, warned last June: “We are paying a lot of money for ghosts in Afghanistan... whether they are ghost teachers, ghost doctors or ghost policeman or ghost soldiers.”

And lest you imagine that the U.S. military has learned its lesson, rest assured that it’s still quite capable of producing nonexistent proxy forces. Take the Pentagon-CIA program to train thousands of carefully vetted “moderate” Syrian rebels, equip them, arm them, and put them in the field to fight the Islamic State. Congress ponied up \$500 million for it, \$384 million of which was spent before that project was shut down as an abject failure. By then, less than 200 American-backed rebels had been trained and even less put into the field in Syria – and they were almost instantly kidnapped or killed, or they simply handed over their equipment to the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front. At one point, according to the congressional testimony of the top American commander in the Middle East, only four or five American-produced rebels were left “in the field.” The cost-per-rebel sent into Syria, by the way, is now estimated at approximately \$2 million.

A final footnote: the general who oversaw this program is, according to the *New York Times*, still a “rising star” in the Pentagon and in line for a promotion.

### **Profli-gate**

You’ve just revisited the privatized, twenty-first-century version of the American way of war, which proved to be a smorgasbord of scandal, mismanagement, and corruption as far as the eye could see. In the tradition of Watergate, perhaps the whole system could be dubbed Profli-gate, since American war making across the Greater Middle East has represented perhaps the most profligate and least effective use of funds in the history of modern warfare. In fact, here’s a word not usually associated with the U.S. military: the war system of this era seems to function remarkably like a monumental scam, a swindle, a fraud.

The evidence is in: the U.S. military can win battles, but not a war, not even against minimally armed minority insurgencies; it can “stand up” foreign militaries, but only if they are filled with phantom feet and if the forces themselves are as hollow as tombs; it can pour funds into the reconstruction of countries, a process guaranteed to leave them more prostrate than before; it can bomb, missile, and drone-kill significant numbers of terrorists and other enemies, even as their terror outfits and insurgent movements continue to grow stronger under the shadow of American

air power. Fourteen years and five failed states later in the Greater Middle East, all of that seems irrefutable.

And here's something else irrefutable: amid the defeats, corruption, and disappointments, there lurks a kind of success. After all, every disaster in which the U.S. military takes part only brings more bounty to the Pentagon. Domestically, every failure results in calls for yet more military interventions around the world. As a result, the military is so much bigger and better funded than it was on September 10, 2001. The commanders who led our forces into such failures have repeatedly been rewarded and much of the top brass, civilian and military, though they should have retired in shame, have taken ever more golden parachutes into the lucrative worlds of defense contractors, lobbyists, and consultancies.

All of this couldn't be more obvious, though it's seldom said. In short, there turns out to be much good fortune in the disaster business, a fact which gives the whole process the look of a classic swindle in which the patsies lose their shirts but the scam artists make out like bandits.

Add in one more thing: these days, the only part of the state held in great esteem by conservatives and the present batch of Republican presidential candidates is the U.S. military. All of them, with the exception of Rand Paul, swear that on entering the Oval Office they will let that military loose, sending in more troops, or special ops forces, or air power, and funding the various services even more lavishly; all of this despite overwhelming evidence that the U.S. military is incapable of spending a dollar responsibly or effectively monitoring what it's done with the taxpayer funds in its possession. (If you don't believe me, forget everything in this piece and just check out the finances of the most expensive weapons system in history, the F-35 Lightning II, which should really be redubbed the F-35 Overrun for its madly spiraling costs.)

But no matter. If a system works (particularly for those in it), why change it? And by the way, in case you're looking for a genuine steal, I have a fabulous gas station in Afghanistan to sell you...