

# Quagmire? What Quagmire?

By Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.) | September 3, 2003

In the months leading up to the recent war in Iraq and in its aftermath, Bush administration officials were forced to continually change their rationale for launching the attack to topple Saddam Hussein. Where they have not wavered, and where they have received consistent support from top Pentagon military commanders, is in their insistence that Iraq is not another Vietnam, not a quagmire. The further the U.S. and the world move from the fall of Baghdad on April 9th, the more it seems that the administration is correct: Iraq is not a quagmire. It is really a black hole.

A quagmire is defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as (1) “land with a soft, muddy surface” or (2) “a precarious or difficult situation.” In either definition, circumstances are not irreversible. A “soft muddy surface” suggests something more solid somewhere beneath, while “difficult” is not the same as impossible.

But media reports the last week in August have made it very clear that the administration has plunged the U.S. over the lip—what is called the “event horizon”—of the human and financial black hole that is post-war Iraq. The significance of passing the astronomical event horizon is that whatever crosses it, even light, cannot recover or be recovered. It is a one-way trip down a “tunnel” at whose end there is no light, only crushing gravity.

Consider the human costs of the Iraq adventure to date:

- The U.S. death toll from all causes since May 1st, the date President Bush declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq, now exceeds the death toll from the three weeks required to seize Baghdad (March 20th-April 9th) and the three weeks thereafter. The 286 U.S. fatalities in the 2003 war is fast approaching the 293 killed in the 1991 Gulf War with Iraq.
- The British lost four more soldiers in late August, bringing their post-May 1st losses to twelve. This is nearly one-quarter of the UK’s total fatalities since March 20th and doubles total UK fatalities in the 1991 Gulf War. And the British are operating in an area the coalition expected to be very receptive to the occupation authorities.
- Not routinely reported are the number of U.S. wounded, who total 1,127 as of September 2nd.
- The UN’s foreign staff lost 16, killed when its Baghdad headquarters was blown up by a vehicular bomb in August. Other relief and humanitarian workers have also been targets, and one Danish soldier has been killed.
- Unreported are the Iraqi dead and wounded from encounters with invading and occupation forces and the series of car bombings in August and early September. And then there are the fatalities caused by inadequate or insufficient public services—electric power, clean water, sanitation—as well as lack of basic security brought on by the wholesale dismissal (“cleansing”) of the Iraqi police force, army, and border guards in May. Today, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, Baghdad has 6,000 policemen, most of whom are in training. Before March 20, the city had 20,000. And today the “army” consists of 1,000 recruits.



Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)

[www.fpi.org](http://www.fpi.org)  
A Think Tank Without Walls

---

The financial aspects of the black hole that is post-war Iraq are astronomical:

- The cost of the war itself is estimated at \$48 billion, with the Pentagon's ongoing operations costing another \$4 billion a month—and no decrease forecast.
- Reconstruction costs for just the post-war part of Fiscal Year 2003, which ends September 30, have been estimated at \$7.3 billion. The administration refuses to estimate costs for 2004, let alone future years. Independent estimates depend on what is included; for example, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has a range of between \$106-\$615 billion over ten years while estimates by Taxpayers for Common Sense run between \$114-\$465 billion.
- The administration had already signaled it would ask Congress for new, substantial Iraq supplemental appropriations in October. Now it says it will need a "few billion more" just to get through September.
- L. Paul Bremer III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), acknowledged that rebuilding Iraq would cost "tens of billions" of dollars and that most of this cost would be paid by U.S. taxpayers. Bremer recently set the cost of providing clean water at \$16 billion and reliable electric power at \$13 billion. He made no estimate about the cost of rebuilding the oil industry, although he did suggest it might cost \$100 billion over the next five years to reconstitute Iraq's "national infrastructure."

In March, even before Baghdad fell, a non-competitive contract to rehabilitate Iraq's oil fields, with an upper limit of \$7 billion, was awarded to Vice President Dick Cheney's former employer, Halliburton, by the Army Corps of Engineers. (As of the end of August, Halliburton had already been paid \$700 million for oil field work, according to information the Corps provided the Washington Post.) As recently as June, the CPA had said Iraq's oil produc-

tion would return to pre-war levels by the end of August. In July this slipped to October; now it has slipped to October 2004. Yet as early as March 27, one week after the war began and well before any evaluation of the condition of the oil infrastructure was possible, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz assured the House Appropriations Committee that oil would be Iraq's self-financing rebuilding engine: "We're dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction, and relatively soon."

Facing an ever-growing black hole from failed oil revenues, the CPA unveiled in late August its latest gambit to revive Iraq's economy: opening the country to outside investment. The U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, according to the *New York Times*, reacted very cautiously. Even though it nominally will have the opportunity to review major investment offers, there is concern that traditional industries, rendered relatively inefficient by 23 years of war, sanctions, and under-investment, would quickly be swamped by new factories, throwing more people out of work in a country where unemployment hovers near 60%.

Indeed, food and agriculture, services, and manufacturing are among major segments of the economy not exempted from foreign investment. What the CPA's scheme does exclude are natural resources (including oil), basic services (electricity, water, and sewage) and areas that would remain under CPA control because of "national security" reasons (e.g., "retraining" members of Iraq's former intelligence service, the Mukhabarat, to work for the CPA). Moreover, the CPA's proposal omits any requirement for investors to reinvest their profits in Iraq. This sets up conditions similar to those in post-Soviet Russia when billions of dollars were exported and stashed in foreign banks while the economy plunged.

While foreign investment is generally considered a plus for economic growth, the terms of the CPA plan seem to run counter to recommendations of the Pentagon-appointed review group that visited Iraq in

---

late June to assess conditions. Headed by former Deputy Defense Secretary John Hamre, the panel put economic development as the third of seven priorities (behind public safety and greater Iraqi involvement in reconstruction efforts). Specifically, it recommended:

- creating short-term, large-scale public works projects that would absorb sizable numbers of people in the labor pool;
- jump-starting a significant number of state-owned enterprises, even those that would not be competitive, because of the great need to produce more job opportunities;
- initiating a “massive” micro-credit program, similar to those that have been successful in impoverished, war-ravaged countries, that would open new avenues for economic activity to new players, especially women.

Private foreign investment will not be interested in any of these areas as economic return would be minimal, if any, and not worth the risk given the lack of security in Iraq.

One characteristic of black holes is that they grow in size as they absorb energy from the surrounding cosmos. Iraq has already snuffed out thousands of lives and absorbed tens of billions of dollars. President Bush reiterated that a “substantial commitment of time and resources” still lies ahead.

Yes, Iraq is not a quagmire. But at a time when U.S. budget deficits of \$401 billion this year and \$480 billion for 2004 are forecast, Iraq looms as an ever-expanding funnel into which human lives, human talent, and monetary resources are being poured, never to be recovered. That, by any measure, defines a veritable black hole.

---

*Dan Smith <dan@fcnl.org> is a military affairs analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)) and a retired U.S. army colonel and senior fellow on Military Affairs at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.*

---

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2003. All rights reserved.

## **Foreign Policy In Focus**

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit [www.fpiif.org](http://www.fpiif.org).

Recommended citation:

Dan Smith, “Quagmire? What Quagmire?,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 3, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.presentdanger.org/commentary/2003/0309quagmire.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Dan Smith

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

**p. 4**

---

**[www.fpiif.org](http://www.fpiif.org)**

A Think Tank Without Walls

