

Rethinking Schools

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Fund the Schools, Not the War



Boondocks

A Rethinking Schools editorial

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Children in both Iraq and the United States would be better served by promoting peace, not funding war.

Most students and educators in the United States don't know that the U.S. war against Iraq didn't end with the Gulf War. Since that war, the United States has besieged Iraq through aerial bombardment and economic sanctions.

According to the London-based *Daily Mirror*, "The bombing is a 'secret war' that has seldom been news. Since 1991, and especially in the last four years, it has been unrelenting and is now deemed the longest Anglo-American campaign of aerial bombardment since World War II."

The United Nations estimates that more than one million people — including more than 500,000 children below the age of five — have died in Iraq as a result of scarcity of food and medicine since the U.S.-led sanctions began in 1990. In its most recent report on the State of the World's Children, UNICEF reported that since the imposition of sanctions the death rate for Iraqi children under the age of five has nearly tripled. In 1996, on the newsmagazine "60 Minutes," former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, when asked about the impact of the sanctions, acknowledged the enormous suffering and deaths of children in Iraq. But, she said, "[We] think the price is worth it."

This U.S. war against Iraq, which may explode into a full-scale invasion at any moment, is deeply disturbing. Hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis have already died and more will die in the future.

There is no justification for the killing of these innocent people.

Another disturbing aspect of Bush's Iraq war is the resentment it generates towards the United States, fueling fundamentalists of all kinds, including terrorists. Far from making the world safe from terrorism, U.S. policy toward Iraq does the opposite.

THE COST AT HOME

We see another profound problem with the war on Iraq: the devastating economic effect it is having on the lives of the majority of Americans. It's disingenuous to talk of "U.S. interests" when so many people in this country suffer from huge cuts in spending for social needs at the same moment that unlimited resources are offered for war.

According to the Center for Defense Information, "at \$396 billion, the U.S. military budget request for FY'03 is more than six times larger than that of Russia, the second biggest spender" and "26 times as large as the combined spending of the seven countries traditionally identified by the Pentagon as our most likely adversaries (Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria)."

The cost of the war against Iraq — and the subsequent occupation — will be astronomical. Lawrence Lindsey, the chief White House economic adviser, was fired after he predicted the cost at \$100 to \$200 billion. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office says the price tag for deploying U.S. forces in the area will be between \$9 billion and \$13 billion, and subsequent costs of a war between \$6 - \$9 billion monthly. Unlike the first Gulf War, when the United States had several allies willing to pony up to share the costs, this time the burden will fall almost exclusively on U.S. taxpayers.

These massive federal expenditures are coming at a time when most local and state governments — and school districts — are reeling under huge budget cuts. According to *Education Week*, "States find themselves with a total of \$40 billion in estimated current-year revenue shortfalls [and]... \$60 billion in projected shortfalls for the next budget year." *Education Week* concludes, "[T]he stormclouds are building right over school budgets."

In many places the storm is already here — cutting back full-day kindergarten, ending spring sports, slashing pensions, increasing class sizes, freezing teacher wages, and shortening the school year. Needless to say, those most adversely affected are urban and rural school districts that don't have the capacity to raise local funds to offset federal and state shortfalls.

States are scrambling to find funds to cover everything from Medicaid to mass transit, and highways to basic social services. While some states had "protected" school budgets up until now, most believe that won't continue. Federal funds are already being diverted to a war economy and the war against Iraq (to say nothing of the Bush tax plan which will provide \$69 billion in tax relief to people earning \$1 million or more). That means fewer funds are available for social programs. This is increasingly the case with K-12 education, of which the federal government funds about 7 percent.

Last year, in an unprecedented move, the federal government intervened in the content of schooling through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandating assessments (read: tests) in grades three to eight. The National Conference of State Legislatures estimates that it will cost states a total of \$1 billion each year to comply with the testing requirements of the NCLB, while the federal government is giving states only \$400 million in the first year of the law. The NCLB was not fully funded from the start. Now Bush has proposed cutting \$90 million from existing funds and providing \$6 billion less for Title I than the Act calls for.

We believe that it's time for the interests of the children in Iraq and in this country to be seen as a priority.

As we go to press, international and domestic pressure is building against Bush's Iraq war. It's immoral. It's irresponsible. If we're to have a chance to secure more federal funding for social programs, including public schools, it's vital that we do everything in our power to stop the war against Iraq.

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