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EDITORIAL

Calling for Candor

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IT'S MORE CRITICAL than ever that the administration level with lawmakers and the American people about the likely financial costs of U.S. involvement in Iraq. But it's not happening. The evasion has a familiar feel. In the weeks leading up to the war, the administration treated anyone who had the temerity to ask about cost as a boob who failed to comprehend that such figures were, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said, "not knowable." Then, five days into the fighting, the administration produced a remarkably precise figure for the size of the check it needed Congress to cut -- instantly. At the same time, the administration waved off questions about the costs of postwar reconstruction, pointing confidently to billions in oil revenue and seized assets. As it turns out, the anticipated oil revenue this year will be a relative trickle, and the amount anticipated for 2004 is far less than needed to get Iraq functioning.

All of which only makes the latest go-round that much more galling and ultimately counterproductive. The United States needs to build public support and understanding for a sustained presence in Iraq, and one precondition will be candor. Sustaining the current level of troops, which administration officials acknowledge will be required for the near future, runs close to \$4 billion a month. In an interview with CNBC's "Capital Report," L. Paul

Bremer pegged the cost of reconstruction in Iraq at "probably well above \$50 billion, \$60 billion, maybe \$100 billion." While some of the requisite funds will come from Iraqi oil revenue or other countries, the United States is inevitably going to foot a big chunk of the bill.

So you might think that the administration would build some costs for Iraq into next year's budget, now moving through Congress. Or at least provide an estimate of what it will request in a supplemental spending bill later. Or a range of likely costs. Instead, administration officials are back to the "not knowable" dodge. The costs can't be stated, White House budget director Joshua B. Bolten told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee the other day, "simply because we don't know what they will be."

Mr. Bolten's response provoked an outpouring of frustration -- and not just from

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Democrats. "I know there are some uncertainties," said Ohio Republican George V. Voinovich. "But I think you can figure out a conservative number and share it with us." Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told Mr. Bolten that failing to come up with reasonable estimates "is going to lead, I believe, to a lot of partisan haggling, bad surprises, whoever is president coming up with supplementals, running out of money unexpectedly. It wasn't unexpected. All of this is fully expected. And so while we are all fully expecting, let us say so."

Administration officials argue that to release estimates now would just set them up for criticism when final costs inevitably diverge and that agencies will inflate their needs to spend the full targeted amount. But those risks hardly outweigh the harm of this hide-the-ball budgeting. A successful mission in Iraq requires the administration to enlist partners: among allies, among lawmakers, among the American people. An honest discussion about costs, even if belated, is an essential prerequisite.

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