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What's Really Going On In Iraq

By Bernice Powell Jackson | SPECIAL TO SACOBSERVER.COM

10/22/03: If what I am reading is really true, then what is going on in Iraq should be of great concern to the U.S. Congress and to each and every American, whether you supported the war in Iraq or not. If what I am reading is really true, then some folks need to be doing some prison time, because it's a crime.

In recent weeks, as the U.S. Congress quickly passed President Bush's request for \$87 billion, with really very little debate and very few questions for so large an amount of money, several articles have appeared in the New York Times and elsewhere reporting of criticism of U.S. contracts being awarded in Iraq by the Iraqi Governing Council. That's right. The Iraqi Governing Council, the very group appointed by the administrator of the U.S. occupation to represent the Iraqi people, is questioning how contracts are being awarded by U.S. corporations, especially Bechtel, and is charging the U.S. administration with gross waste and mismanagement. Yet our Congress never invited members of the Iraqi Governing Council to testify at its seemingly pre-determined hearings or sought to determine the opinions of the very people whom we say we want to empower to lead their own nation.

For example, it was reported that members of the Iraqi Governing Council questioned why the U.S. government has issued a \$20 million contract to purchase new weapons for the Iraqi police force when every day U.S. soldiers are confiscating thousands of weapons in Iraq. Why can't these weapons be recycled, asked Iraqi officials. Why didn't our Congress ask the same question? Why aren't we, the American people, asking that same question?

Or, the Iraqis asked, why are we spending \$1.2 billion to train Iraqi police officers in Jordan, when they could be trained for much less inside Iraq. Although U.S. officials say that the facilities in Iraq are inadequate, the Iraqi Governing Council argues otherwise. Or, the Iraqis asked, why are business cronies of Saddam Hussein receiving large contracts from the U.S.

occupying powers? And what about the charges that some Bechtel employees were seeking to become silent partners in Iraqi companies receiving enormous unbid contracts. Who is investigating such charges? In fact, is any U.S. government monitoring agency carefully watching what is happening to the billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars being spent so freely in Iraq? And who is raising the question of why we bother to have an Iraqi Governing Council if we don't heed their advice?

The Cleveland Plain Dealer did a full page spread recently showing what we could buy with \$87 billion in Cleveland. It included for education an additional \$1.8 billion for the financially strapped Cleveland Public Schools, \$4 billion for the entire Head Start program across the nation and \$162 million to send 1,000 students to Harvard. It included for housing \$350 million to do lead abatement in old housing in the Cleveland area, \$2.6 billion to end homelessness in Cleveland and \$314 million for 1,500 new housing units. For Cleveland's infrastructure (a significant cost in the Iraqi funds) there would be \$1.3 billion over 30 years for our aging sewer system, \$56 billion for the electric grid, not only for Cleveland but for the whole nation (and we know that needs much work) and \$20 million for new generators for the Cleveland water system, so that another blackout won't stop the water delivery. For the poor in Cleveland there would be \$3.8 million for school lunches for poor children and \$25 million to provide health insurance for 2 million Ohioans now without. We could build a new Cleveland Convention Center for \$400 million, providing desperately needed construction and travel industry jobs and there would be \$765 million for the NASA Glenn Research Center here in Cleveland, but which would impact the whole nation. There would be \$400 million for highway construction here and \$218 million for a major, much-needed downtown public transportation project. There would be money for day care and after-school programs for all Cleveland area children and hundreds of millions for the arts and even money for sending high school valedictorians on a fun day at the Cedar Point amusement park and money for a free Bruce Springsteen concert for Clevelanders. Imagine what \$87 billion could do where you live.

I accept the fact that now that we've bombed Iraq, destroying much of its already decaying infrastructure and are the occupying power in Iraq, we have a legal and moral responsibility to rebuild it. I don't accept the fact that gross mismanagement and misuse of taxpayer funds is inevitable or permissible. I don't accept the fact that the U.S. Congress just gives a pass to the Bush administration's request for an enormous amount of funds desperately needed by every city and every state in this nation. Maybe we all need to sit down with our Congresspersons face to face and let them know this is un-American and it's just not acceptable.

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