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# Bush aides admit Iraq missteps

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## Say estimates on oil revenue, damage off

By Wayne Washington, Globe Staff, 9/9/2003

WASHINGTON -- One day after President Bush gave the nation a cautious view of rebuilding efforts in Iraq, senior administration officials for the first time acknowledged that they vastly underestimated the damage to the country's infrastructure and greatly overestimated the amount of oil revenue that could be used to help rebuild the war-torn country.

ADVERTISEMENT Yesterday's sobering assessments came as members of Congress are contemplating Bush's request for \$87 billion to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan -- and call into question earlier pronouncements by administration officials about the size and cost of the job.

The disclosures, coming on the heels of Bush's prime-time address, mark the administration's strongest acknowledgment to date that it failed to fully comprehend the complexities of rebuilding Iraq.

Years of neglect by deposed president Saddam Hussein left the country's infrastructure in much worse shape than anyone imagined, one administration official said. And current oil revenue estimates of \$12 billion this year and \$40 billion in 2005 and 2006 will be less than half what administration officials previously told Congress would be available to offset US costs to rebuild the country.

The admissions seemed intended as a show of contrition to congressional critics from both parties who contend that the administration was minimizing the costs, dangers, and difficulties of rebuilding Iraq. The \$87 billion, which would cover military and reconstruction costs for the upcoming fiscal year, would come on top of the \$79 billion Congress approved earlier this year.

Congressional leaders said they are inclined to support the administration's request but not before demanding a realistic assessment of the situation in Iraq and more specifics about how the money will be spent.

"We all want Iraq to become a peaceful democracy, but the White House and the Pentagon need to stop treating the American people and Congress like some kind of ATM machine to finance their foreign policy adventures," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat who sits on the Armed Services Committee, said he will offer amendments to the funding legislation that would force the administration to spell out when US forces will be withdrawn from Iraq, how long the occupation will last, when basic services such as water and electricity will be provided, and how much the reconstruction will cost.

The administration has resisted going into such details, and the president's prime-time address Sunday night did not offer those specifics.

"Pouring \$87 billion more into this occupation without a plan means repeating the same mistakes that are causing the administration's current failure in Iraq," Kennedy said. "The situation in Iraq is extremely serious, and it reflects a true lack of understanding by this administration of that country and its people."

In April, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz told Congress that revenue from Iraqi oil would be

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\$50 billion to \$100 billion over a two- to three-year period and would cover a substantial portion of US costs to rebuild the country. But yesterday, in a briefing with reporters, senior administration officials said the revenue will be nowhere near that high.

"Any sort of estimates in this kind of situation are very difficult, particularly so in a country like Iraq that had so little clear visibility to the outside world on everything that was going on," said one of the administration officials, speaking on the condition he not be named. "So I think it is fair to say that the level of decay and underinvestment in the Iraqi infrastructure was worse than almost anyone on the outside anticipated."

Iraq's crumbling infrastructure also complicates work there, another administration official in Baghdad said.

"It's difficult to exaggerate the chronic underinvestment in Iraq's infrastructure over the past 30-plus years," said that official, also speaking on anonymity. "We were all surprised with how neglected, brittle, and fragile the infrastructure was here."

The official said the main oil refinery in Baghdad is relying on 50-year-old boilers that are duct-taped together, and a key textile plant is working with British machines made 40 years ago.

Critics say the administration should have known that the problems in Iraq were staggering, especially given the UN sanctions against trade with Iraq -- something the administration supported -- made modernization difficult.

"The administration must put aside its pride and embarrassment over the current disarray in Iraq and develop a plan to put more international troops and police on the ground in Iraq and to provide the shared reconstruction resources we need to bring to a close the occupation," Kennedy said.

Of the \$87 billion Bush asked for on Sunday night, \$21 billion would go to rebuild the infrastructures of Afghanistan and Iraq. Administration officials said Iraq would get the lion's share of that \$21 million. The final \$66 billion would cover the military costs of occupying both countries. Iraq again is the heavy focus, with \$51 billion slated to be spent on the military there.

While congressional leaders praised Bush for going before the American public and explaining the importance of stabilizing Iraq, they are still insisting on more details. Democrats are using the massive funding request to highlight their complaint that Bush's priorities are skewed.

"We've got \$13 billion a month for Iraq and Afghanistan, and we can't fund [education]?" Senator Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa asked.

Administration officials said that the \$87 billion request would not prevent the deficit from being cut in half over the next five years and that there are no plans to ask for spending cuts to offset its impact. The request also does not change the president's position that the tax cuts he has signed into law should be made permanent.

Meanwhile, moderates are pushing the administration to seek international funding to help defray the costs of rebuilding Iraq.

"I am willing to support extra funding for our troops in Iraq if we can secure more international support to pay for our rebuilding efforts," Senator John B. Breaux, Democrat of Louisiana, said. "Like the people of Iraq, the people of Louisiana have a need for better education, improved roads and bridges."

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