

Iraq: 5 years of bad Feith

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

On Monday afternoon in Baghdad's once-fashionable Mansour district, five U.S. soldiers were killed when a young man walked up to them to chat and then detonated the explosive vest he was wearing.

Will that be enough to convince a nation with a famously short attention span to re-focus on the continuing tragedy that is the war in Iraq?

Our guess: Probably not. These were somebody else's kids, after all.

Besides, the governor of New York just got caught in a prostitution ring, spring training is under way and it's almost time for March Madness. There are so many other distractions, among them a presidential race that includes a Republican who thinks we should stay in Iraq for a hundred years, if necessary, and two Democrats whose party can't agree on forcing an end to the war's funding.

And speaking of funding, in Sunday's Washington Post, two U.S. economists - one a Nobel laureate - raised their estimate of the eventual total cost of the Iraq war to the U.S. economy from \$2 trillion to \$3 trillion. The direct monthly cost of fighting the war now stands at \$12 billion.

Also on Sunday, The Washington Post reported that Douglas Feith, one of the architects of the war, will claim in a book to be published next month that in December 2002, three months before the war started and with United Nations weapons inspectors still compiling data on Saddam Hussein's weapons program, President George W. Bush told his National Security Council that "war is inevitable."

Feith, the former undersecretary of defense for policy, also claims in the book's manuscript that he had postwar planning well in hand but was sabotaged by others in the administration.

So there you have it: One week shy of five years since "Shock and Awe" began what was to be a quick and relatively cheap exercise - \$50 to \$60 billion, tops - to topple a dictator who had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction, the war that just won't end keeps killing and maiming other people's kids, husbands, wives, brothers and sisters.

It keeps draining money that could be used for other vital purposes - health care, Social Security, roads and bridges, you name it. Economists Linda Bilmes of Harvard and Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia estimate the direct costs of the war will top \$1 trillion. When you add the long-term costs of health care and disability payments

for veterans and the displacement costs elsewhere in the economy, they reckon the overall cost at \$3 trillion.

The people who created this fiasco continue to profit from it. Feith reportedly got a six-figure advance from HarperCollins for his memoirs, in which he rips everyone from former Secretary of State Colin Powell to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to retired Gen. Tommy Franks for messing up his finely-laid plans.

Still, we have Feith to thank for confirming our suspicions that the president had decided war was inevitable three months before the first bomb dropped. One more lie - the myth of George W. Bush as a reluctant warrior - has been laid to rest.

The greatest success of Bush's "surge" of 30,000 additional troops last year has been in public relations: Once all those troops were deployed, the surge got the war off the front pages most days by reducing U.S. casualties and bloodshed - but not by eliminating them. Today, U.S. troops are dying in Iraq at the rate of about one a day. The five-year U.S. death toll now stands at 3,980. Iraq's central government remains gravely dysfunctional. The Iraqi army is a long way from taking over. Factional reconciliation still is a pipe dream, as is the reduction of U.S. forces that a successful surge was supposed to enable.

What's worrisome about Monday's suicide bombing is that it was targeted directly at "surged" troops that were conducting a classic counterinsurgency mission. Five soldiers were walking a "beat" down a street in a neighborhood that was their responsibility. They stopped to talk to a citizen.

If this is a sign of things to come, the war will back on the front page. As it should be. It's time to go.

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