

Iraq: The \$3 trillion war

The Bush administration used fear to sell its invasion of Iraq, said the *San Jose Mercury News* in an editorial. But “what’s really scary, as the fifth anniversary approaches, is the cost.” In a new book starkly titled *The Three Trillion Dollar War*, Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz estimates that by the time the war winds down and the troops come home, the cost to U.S. taxpayers will in fact be a staggering \$3,000,000,000,000—roughly 50 times the White House’s prewar predictions. “And that’s a conservative estimate,” said Joseph Stiglitz and co-author Linda Bilmes in *The Washington Post*. Our estimate includes many of the war’s hidden costs, such as the lost productivity of wounded veterans and the rise in oil prices. But it does not include the cost of the economic slump that the war has triggered, nor does it speak to the schools that could have been built or the bridges that could have been repaired. Three trillion dollars may seem hard to grasp, but “we’ve done the math.”

Congratulations, said Christopher Hitchens in *The Washington Post*, but so what? Even if it were possible to determine the exact cost of a war, the figure doesn’t have any meaning until you compare it with the cost of *not* going to war,



U.S. troops on patrol near Baghdad

which in this case might have been even higher. You can start with the cost of maintaining no-fly zones over Iraq into perpetuity, then add in the cost of extinguishing the huge fires Saddam was so fond of starting in Kuwaiti oil fields. But then you’d also have to include the money we would have spent responding to “the genocidal and aggressive adventures which were his government’s *raison d’être*.” If we could total up the costs of allowing Saddam to stay in power, three trillion dollars to depose him may look like a bargain.

Whatever the precise cost of the war, said Bob Herbert in *The New York Times*, there’s no denying that “the Bush administration has tried its best” to hide it. The White House has insisted on financing the war through so-called emergency supplemental funding bills, which aren’t subject to the usual congressional oversight. They’ve also relied on “heavy outsourcing of military tasks” to private contractors, said Gary Kamiya in *Salon.com*, whose exorbitant bills get paid and then filed away in the bowels of the Pentagon accounting department. The very fact that we don’t know the war’s true cost is a scandal in itself. While we argue about the numbers, can’t we at least agree that all future wars come “with a full disclosure statement”?