

Musings On Waste

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This column is rated NH-60. Reader discretion is advised because the Rating Board believes this to be a Not Happy (NH) column that most readers will consider patently too curmudgeonly for anyone younger than 60.

Moral(e) Waste: To date the human cost of the Iraq war is horrendous. As found on icasualties.org the death toll in Iraq includes 3,622 U.S. soldiers, 287 coalition soldiers, 412 contractors, 7,252 Iraqi security forces and, according to iraqbodycount.org, about 70,000 Iraqi civilians, though some estimates of Iraqi deaths are much, much higher.

At a minimum, then, more than 81,000 people have been killed so far. Many times this number have been injured. And there are millions of Iraqis who have been displaced and millions more who have fled their country.

To date the financial cost of the war, according to nationalpriorities.org, is more than 440 billion dollars, increasing a few thousand dollars each second, 15 million each hour, a third of a billion dollars each day, and the total allocation approved by Congress now exceeds half a trillion dollars.

Given the terrible cost of this war which is increasingly viewed as a political, strategic, tactical and humanitarian mistake, it wasn't surprising that the first reporter to question President Bush during his last press conference expressed incredulous frustration that the president couldn't immediately stop the war he started (transcribed by [The New York Times](#)):



Stripped sycamore on East Second Street just north of Military

"Mr. President," the reporter said, "you started this war, the war of your choosing, and you can end it alone, today, at this point. Bring in peacekeepers, U.N. peacekeepers. Two million Iraqis have fled their country as refugees. Two million more are displaced. Thousands and thousands are dead. Don't you accept -- don't you understand, we brought the Al Qaida into Iraq?"

"Actually," President Bush said, "I was hoping to solve the Iraqi issue diplomatically. That's why I went to the United Nations and worked with the United Nations Security Council, which unanimously passed a resolution that said, Disclose, disarm or face serious consequences. That was the message -- clear message to Saddam Hussein. He chose the course."

"But didn't we go into Iraq?" the reporter asked.

President Bush replied: "It was his decision to make."

But, I wonder now as I ponder this historical distortion, if our Grand Decider, if our Putative Commander-in-Chief can't stop the waste, who can?

Student Waste: In "The Big Enchilada" in the August [*Harper's Magazine*](#), educator Jonathan Kozol warns us that the privatization of schools through vouchers "has not gone away, and the threat it represents to democratic education is more dangerous than ever."

Those who advocate privatization claim that their primary concern is for students. It's hard to argue with them when so many students live in neighborhoods blighted by crime, poverty, broken families and unemployment. Certainly public education in too many urban areas seems incapable of fixing its facilities or of finding and retaining teachers capable of dealing with the educational and social problems they must confront to be successful.

So maybe the voucher folks are right. We spend \$490 billion (4 percent of GNP) on education, but nobody makes big profits

like the CEOs of companies. Maybe our educational system is too socialistic, not competitive enough.

Maybe the profit motive can fix this problem in the same way that it fixed healthcare. Maybe deregulation could help education in the same way it has helped the distribution of telecom services and energy. Maybe we should just privatize education so that people could make a profit off our children's future by buying and selling education shares on the open market.

If we believe this, as Kozol points out, "we may soon wake up to find that [public schools] have been replaced by wholly owned subsidiaries of McDonald's, Burger King, and Wal-Mart."

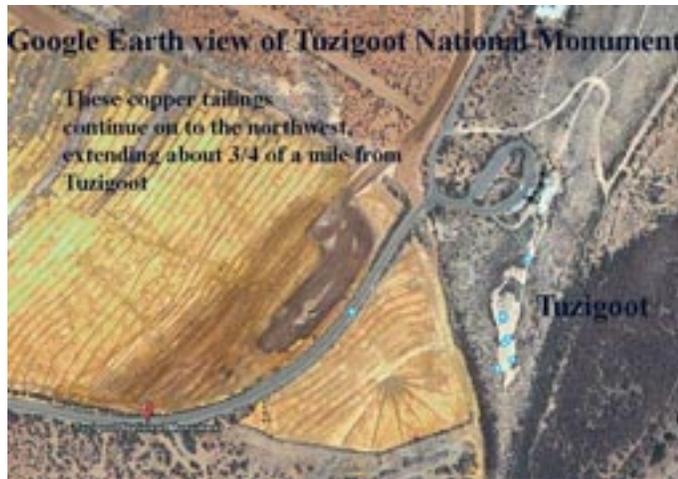
So what's wrong with that? A Big Mac diploma has a certain appeal. And short-selling Johnny's education at Underfunded High to pay for Suzie's instruction at Nobel Learning or Edison may be exactly the kind of innovation we need to save our children.

Environmental Waste: Also in the August [Harper's Magazine](#) there's a collection of eerily beautiful photographs by J. Henry Fair, who "specializes in portraits and images of environmental degradation," that reminded me of our trip some years back to Cottonwood, Arizona.

My wife and I camped at [Dead Horse Ranch State Park](#), a great place to stay that's close to Jerome, a little art town in the mountains overlooking Cottonwood, and that's also close to the ancient [Tuzigoot pueblo](#), built about one thousand years ago, consisting of two and three-story structures that contained more than 100 rooms. The Sinagua people, who lived at Tuzigoot for some 400 years, were agricultural traders who situated their pueblo on a hilltop so that they had a clear view of those approaching.

A millennium ago one can imagine a Sinaguan watching the valley as traders as well as returning tribe members approached, for the Sinaguans were involved in trade that

extended for hundreds of miles. And visitors today can scan the horizon south toward Cottonwood and west toward Jerome. But when a visitor looks north, as my wife and I did, he sees a strange configuration of dark metallic-gold furrows, some parallel, some fanning out like spokes in a wheel.



These are copper tailing ponds left over from the [United Verde copper mine](#) that operated in the area until the 1930s. You can see how these tailings scar the earth by using Google Earth to fly to Tuzigoot. Then you

can fly to Barstow, Florida, the site of one of Fair's photographs, where you'll see how the production of fertilizer has created iridescent green and yellow pools surrounded by desolate white bands. If you want to continue your wasteful journey on a grand scale, you might search for deforested areas like those in West Africa and Brazil.

Or you can seek out more modest environmental waste by getting up from your computer and going to East Second Street in Benicia, just north of Military, where there's a recently denuded sycamore.

"I think that I shall never see/ A poem lovely as a tree," Joyce Kilmer wrote, or a new building as ugly, he might have agreed, behind a desecrated stump.

Hope Waste Not: While these problems are conundrums of the highest order, there is one thing we could do with our children, something that addresses an omission in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution, that would help them and us with these problems. On this I'll have more to say next week.



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