

The terrible cost of Washington's wars

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Harvard University's new report estimating that the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will end up costing as much as \$6 trillion is another indication of the terrible price paid by working people the world over for the crimes of imperialism.

This is the latest in a series of studies done by Harvard's senior lecturer on public policy, Linda Bilmes, together with economist Joseph Stiglitz. Each successive study has raised the estimate of the wars' long-term costs, due in large measure to the rising and sustained costs of caring for and compensating hundreds of thousands of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who have returned home suffering grievous physical and psychological trauma.

Concealed behind the raw numbers are lives forever altered, not only for the 50,000 American troops "wounded in action," but also for hundreds of thousands more suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health problems—fully one third of those deployed—and traumatic brain injuries (inflicted on over a quarter of a million troops).

The Pentagon has attributed the unprecedented number of soldiers and Marines diagnosed with PTSD, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues to a changed culture within the armed forces dispelling some of the stigma associated with reporting such problems in previous wars.

While no doubt this is a factor, the nature of the wars themselves plays a decisive role. Launched on the basis of lies about terrorism and "weapons of mass destruction," the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq initiated protracted dirty colonial-style occupations aimed at subjugating whole peoples and laying hold of strategic resources, most critically oil.

Soldiers told they were being sent to avenge 9/11 and fight Al Qaeda found themselves engaged in an entirely different enterprise, which involved terrible crimes against civilians and the turning of entire populations

into the "enemy."

Of course, the \$6 trillion figure included in the Harvard report does not begin to make a full accounting for these wars. It assesses only the impact on the US economy. What of the cost of rebuilding countries shattered by wars in which more than 1 million Iraqis and Afghans lost their lives? What about the cost of helping millions more who have been maimed or turned into refugees in their own countries?

As for the measurable costs of the wholesale destruction of social infrastructure—water, electricity, education, health care, employment—the study only includes the amount spent by the US government in reconstruction schemes riddled with corruption and incompetence, in which tens of billions of dollars were wasted or disappeared into the pockets of shady contractors and crooked politicians.

Then there was the financing of the wars. Bush administration officials such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld claimed at the outset that the cost of the Iraq war would be "something under \$50 billion"—less than one one-hundredth of the current estimate.

The wars were funded through "supplemental appropriations," a practice begun under Bush and continued under Obama, including to finance his Afghanistan surge. Paid for "off the books" of the normal budgetary process, the true costs to the American people—now estimated at \$75,000 per household—were kept hidden. Instead of raising revenues to pay for military operations, the government cut taxes for the rich and borrowed some \$2 trillion, largely from abroad.

These methods of financing the wars, supported by both Democrats and Republicans, were of a piece with the fraud, parasitism and socially destructive forms of speculation that pervade the workings of the US financial system and American capitalism as a whole.

While officials of both parties join the refrain that

there is no money for jobs, decent wages, education, quality health care and other vital social necessities, they were prepared to raise immense resources for Washington's war machine—leaving them to be paid for through intensified austerity measures against working people.

Bilmes, who correctly dismisses any prospect of the ending of full-scale wars in Iraq and Afghanistan producing a “peace dividend,” predicts that another long-term impact of war costs will be “a much smaller amount of an already-shrinking defense budget available for core military functions.” She suggests that the spiraling medical and compensation costs will likely produce a reduction in troop levels and a “greater investment in unmanned weaponry,” such as armed drones.

The Obama administration has dramatically expanded drone warfare, conducting murderous remote-controlled bombing campaigns against defenseless populations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere and proclaiming the presidential right to order drone assassinations of American citizens. However, this tactical shift by no means precludes the launching of wars that are far more costly in lives and resources than those waged in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Indeed, the impunity enjoyed by those who launched the wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure to hold anyone accountable for patent war crimes—in the first instance George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and George Tenet—makes more such wars all the more likely.

The Obama administration has already carried out war for regime change in Libya and is backing a similar war in Syria, while threatening Iran with military aggression, deploying troops to Africa and carrying out a “pivot” toward Asia accompanied by continuous ratcheting up of military tensions with China.

While the working class had no say in the decision to launch wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan and will be offered none in the new wars already being prepared, it will bear their full cost in the form of redoubled attacks on jobs, wages and essential social services, as well as in the killing and maiming of young workers sent to fight them.

The vast resources wasted and the incalculable human suffering inflicted by the bloated US military and intelligence apparatus pose the urgency of building a genuine mass movement against militarism and war. This can develop only as an independent social and political movement of the working class directed against the capitalist system.

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