

US has spent nearly \$5 trillion on wars since 9/11

By Bill Van Auken
14 September 2016

In another indication of the terrible price paid by working people in the United States and all over the globe for the crimes of US imperialism, a new report from Brown University estimates that Washington has squandered nearly \$5 trillion since September 11, 2001 on the wars launched under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

The report coincides with the 15th anniversary of 9/11, with 10,000 US troops still in Afghanistan, 15 years after the US invasion of that country, and an estimated 6,000 in Iraq. Hundreds more special operations forces have been deployed to Syria, where the US is fighting for regime change in a de facto alliance with that country's affiliates of Al Qaeda—which was supposedly the principal target of the last decade and a half of war.

While the financial costs of these wars are staggering, bordering on the unfathomable, the author of the report, Boston University professor Neta Crawford, correctly places them in their far broader, and more horrifying, context of the trail of blood and destruction that US military operations have left in their wake:

“...a full accounting of any war's burdens cannot be placed in columns on a ledger. From the civilians harmed or displaced by violence, to the soldiers killed and wounded, to the children who play years later on roads and fields sown with improvised explosive devices and cluster bombs, no set of numbers can convey the human toll of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or how they have spilled into the neighboring states of Syria and Pakistan, and come home to the US and its allies in the form of wounded veterans and contractors.”

Some of these numbers are also quantifiable, and appalling, from the over one million Iraqi lives lost to the US invasion of 2003 to the more than 12 million

refugees driven from just the four countries laid waste by US wars: Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Syria. In addition, there are the nearly 7,000 US troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with roughly an equal number of private contractors, as well as the 52,000 officially listed as wounded in combat and the untold hundreds of thousands more suffering from traumatic brain injuries, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other mental health problems resulting from multiple deployments in dirty colonial-style wars.

Nonetheless, the report argues persuasively that it is also vital to make a serious and comprehensive evaluation of the real financial costs of these wars.

The overall cost of US imperialism's wars includes the \$1.7 trillion directly appropriated by Congress to wage them as so-called Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO). This is above and beyond the Pentagon's base budget, which totals some \$6.8 trillion from FY2001-2016.

By defining these wars as OCOs, Congress, together with both the Bush and Obama administrations, has acted as if they are some kind of unforeseeable emergencies that could not be planned for within the government's normal budgetary process, even as they dragged out for a decade and a half. As a result, they were freed from any kind of normal fiscal accountability, with no taxes or other revenues allotted to pay for them.

In addition to this direct war funding, the report includes the costs of veterans' medical and disability care, allocations for Homeland Security, interest on Pentagon war appropriations and future costs for veterans' care.

This last cost is estimated at amounting to at least \$1 trillion between now and 2053. The basis for such an estimate is made clear by the presentation of some

alarming statistics.

By the end of 2015, more than 1,600 soldiers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan had undergone major limb amputations as a result of wounds suffered in combat. A total of 327,000 veterans of these wars had been diagnosed with Traumatic Brain Injury as of 2014 and by the same year fully 700,000 out of the 2.7 million people deployed to the war zones had been classified as 30 percent or more disabled.

The report points out that Veterans Affairs is the fastest growing department in the US government, with its staffing levels having nearly doubled since 2001 to 350,000 workers. Yet, according to another recent report, it “still lacks sufficient funding to fill thousands of vacancies for doctors and nurses and to finance badly needed repairs to its hospitals and clinics.”

In addition to these costs, the report estimates that, unless Congress changes the way that it is paying for the wars, even without their continuation, cumulative interest on war appropriations made just through FY2013 will amount to a staggering \$7.9 trillion by 2053.

The report recalls that as the Bush administration was preparing to launch the war of aggression against Iraq, the administration’s chief economic adviser Lawrence Lindsey came under intense fire for estimating that the “upper bound” costs of the war reached between \$100 and \$200 billion. This estimate was roundly rejected by everyone from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to House Democrats, who put the figure at roughly \$50 billion, which it is now clear underestimated the real cost by a factor of 100.

Reflected in these wars, both in the criminality with which they were initiated and fought, and in the way they were funded, are the financial parasitism and socially destructive forms of speculation that pervade the workings of American capitalism as a whole.

By keeping the wars’ costs “off the books” and relying on an “all-volunteer” military to fight them, the US ruling class also hoped to dampen the popular hostility to militarism.

The new report does not attempt to estimate the wars’ broader impact on the economy and the living standards of broad masses of American working people. Another report issued two years ago by Harvard University conservatively estimated that the cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars amounted to

\$75,000 for every American household.

The report points to previous studies indicating that the wars cost tens of thousands of jobs and significantly reduced investment in infrastructure. The vast amount of resources diverted into slaughter and destruction in the Middle East and Central Asia could have funded the \$3.32 trillion that the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) says must be spent over the next decade to fix America’s crumbling ports, highways, bridges, trains, water and electric facilities and paid off the entire \$1.26 trillion in student debt, with money left over.

Instead, the elected officials of both major capitalist parties have continuously insisted that there is no money for jobs, decent wages, education, health care and other basic necessities, while spending unlimited money on militarism and war, leaving the bill to be paid for through the intensification of austerity measures directed against the working class.

The human and fiscal toll wrought by the wars of the last 15 years are only a foretaste of the global catastrophe that is threatened as US imperialism prepares for far larger wars, with its military escalation focused ever more directly against the world’s second and third largest nuclear powers, Russia and China.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>