In the four months leading up to the invasion of Iraq, the National Priorities Project worked with the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies on a program called Cities for Peace. Its purpose was to give local officials and the residents of specific cities an opportunity to discuss the implications of war in Iraq and to consider passing resolutions opposing it. Elected officials from over 160 cities and counties, including some of our nation's largest, successfully passed resolutions. Facing the most severe fiscal crises in 50 years, one of the most convincing arguments local organizers used in passing the resolutions was estimates we provided showing the local taxpayer cost of such a war to communities.

While the local costs are indeed startling (for example, Chicago, $775 million, Albuquerque, $92 million), it is important to realize this is only step one in the Bush administration's aggressive new preemptive war strategy. The budgets needed to carry out this policy are so enormous and the weaponry so expensive that the Pentagon will have to take money from already under-funded social programs and renege on long-standing federal commitments to address such domestic concerns as child poverty, deteriorating schools and access to adequate health care. As happened during the Reagan years, federal commitments to social and economic needs could again be sacrificed to high military spending.

A City in Crisis

One of the cities to pass the resolution is New Haven, Connecticut. Like many cities, New Haven is in crisis. During the last 3 decades it has lost 40% of its well-paying manufacturing jobs, primarily to service jobs that consistently pay 20-30% less. At 12.7/1000, the infant mortality rate is comparable to that of Bulgaria or Costa Rica. The child poverty rate has been between 33% and 35% for over 20 years. Having to address social and educational needs, a financially-strapped school system suffers from a high student to teacher ratio and underpaid teachers. The city finds itself in a vicious cycle: parents need to work several jobs to make ends meet, but don't have the time to support their children's education. Schools produce another generation of under-prepared, under-skilled workers.

The current state fiscal crisis exacerbates the problem. In balancing its budget this past November, the state of Connecticut cut back child health insurance, social services and access to higher education. It so severely cut aid to cities that New Haven had to eliminate 126 city employees. By the time it released its own budget in March, it was forced to cut 110 more positions in the school department alone. According to the mayor's office, the cuts in teachers and paraprofessionals "make it extremely difficult for the kids who are falling behind to catch up to everyone else."

Communities across the country are facing similar crises. For example:

- 30 of the nation's largest cities, and hundreds of counties, have child poverty rates of 30% or more. The national child poverty rate of 19% ranks considerably higher than most industrialized countries;
- 33% of our schools, almost equally urban, suburban and rural, are in need of significant repair, at a cost of $127 billion;
- 39% of renters in the nation can not afford fair market rent, resulting in dramatic increase in requests for emergency food and shelter assistance;
- 41 million people, 9 million of them children, lack health insurance;
- 7 million people work at minimum wage jobs that pay a third of what is considered a living wage. Many families are forced to work 2-3 jobs in order to balance their household budgets.
While these problems have been made worse by current economic conditions, they are, by and large, structural, and reflect a much smaller federal commitment than other industrialized countries. In fact, when compared with these countries, the US ranks 16th in efforts to lift children out of poverty, 22nd in infant mortality and is the only industrialized country not to offer universal health insurance.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, advocates for addressing these concerns hoped a peace dividend from reduced federal spending on the military would help solve these problems. After all, the $400 billion a year Soviet military budget of the early 1980s had declined by over 80% by the mid 1990s. During the 1990s the Pentagon budget did recede from the massive Reagan military buildup to slightly below average Cold War levels. However there was no successful major government effort to substantially address any of the educational or health-care issues discussed above, and little was added to US federal social spending. Much of the money saved from Pentagon cuts went to bring the federal budget out of the deficit that had been caused largely by Reagan administration tax breaks.

More Cuts on the Way

Forget about No Child Left Behind and other social concerns. The current and proposed Bush administration policies will only make conditions in local communities dramatically worse. It proposes military budgets that rise to $480 billion by 2008, excluding the war, peace-keeping, and rebuilding Iraq.

Included is a small part of the money for a missile defense system that ECAAR estimates could actually cost up to $800 billion to $1.2 trillion. It proposes another round of tax cuts, especially for the very wealthy that will devour close to $2 trillion in revenues over the next 10 years.

These combined policies have already led the House of Representatives to propose over $500 billion in cuts in social spending in the next 10 years. While not even this conservative administration is likely to go that far, it is clear that we are moving rapidly in this dangerous direction.

Even fewer people than now will have access to health care. Our students, especially from poor communities, will fall further behind. Affordable housing will become more scarce. More people will suffer from hunger. Veterans will struggle even more than they do now to obtain adequate benefits to deal with service-related medical problems.

The Pentagon Budget in Perspective

Before sacrificing our communities to a skyrocketing Pentagon budget, it is important to put military spending in perspective.

At $399 billion, the proposed FY2004 Pentagon budget:
• Is 2 ½ times expenditures on HUD, the Department of Education, EPA, food and nutrition, and job training combined;
• Is as much as the next 21 countries combined;
• Is 66 times what Iraq, Iran and North Korea combined spend and almost 3 times these countries and China ($47 billion) and Russia ($65 billion) combined;
• Is 14 times the Homeland security budget;
• Includes at least $23 billion in Cold War-era weapons, $9.1 billion in missile defense, and $16.9 billion in nuclear weapons;
• Excludes the costs of war in Iraq.
Local Impacts

The taxpayer cost to local communities is startling. For instance, this year's Pentagon budget costs New Haven taxpayers $144 million, comparable to 5 months of the city's operating budget. The $80 billion down payment on the Iraq war for the city is $28.8 million dollars, enough to hire 100 new teachers, provide Head Start for 2,000 children and provide health insurance for 3,000 children. The $3.6 million cost to the city for missile defense this year could build 36 affordable housing units.

The Enormous Cost of Empire

As significant as the amount we want to spend on the Pentagon is the direction we are headed. The administration's new policy of preemption, which has quickly manifested itself into a unilateral war in Iraq, represents a radical departure from successful policies of deterrence and creating multilateral institutions.

This ignores international treaties, if doing so best suits the country in the short run. Claiming that "the best defense is a good offense," it instead calls for an aggressive foreign policy incorporating preemptive attacks against perceived enemies. Instead of creating weapons to address specific threats posed by clearly defined enemies, it proposes buying weapons capable of fighting any kind of war with any imaginable adversary, any place on earth or in space, at any point in time-from now to the far distant future.

The plan calls for permanent US military domination of every region on the globe. As Bush's September National Security document reads, "The United States will require bases and stations within and beyond Western Europe and Northeast Asia, as well as temporary access arrangements for the long distance deployment of US troops."

In this game plan, regime change in Iraq is only the first step in a wholesale reordering of the power structure in the region and the entire world. As Undersecretary of State John Bolton told Israelis in February, after defeating Iraq, the US would "deal with Iran, Syria and North Korea."

A New Foreign Policy

Our cities cannot afford such attempts at military superiority and unilateral war without end. The richest, most powerful nation in the world ought to be able to develop federal policies that allow us to provide basic security at home while taking a leadership role in addressing international terrorism.

We deserve social policies that other countries have, including universal health insurance, quality schools for all, a real national commitment to end poverty. We could lead the world in fighting terrorism and poverty and ensure, as we did when we helped create the UN after World War II, that it has world-class international structures to address world crises.

The current foreign and military policy does neither. It devours resources sorely needed to address concerns at home, while angering and alienating the rest of the world.

Bringing the Cost Home

Cities for Peace has used local impact data to bring the cost of the war to a level ordinary people can understand. Local elected officials and housing, anti-poverty, environmental and other activists could build from this experience. They could expose the large cost of militarism and the United States' unilateralist policy to our communities. They could use the data to contrast local needs with the relatively small amount the federal government spends locally to address needs. Localizing this information is great for building local coalitions, attracting media, and holding federal officials accountable to local needs. After all, all politics, even federal
politics, are local.

Greg Speeter is executive director of The National Priorities Project, which provides information on the impacts, especially the local impacts, of federal tax and spending policies. Its programs include reports and fact sheets, a website (www.nationalpriorities.org), new interactive localized database, and collaborations with and outreach to national campaigns and local organizations.

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