War is hell - and hellishly expensive
By William D. Hartung

War is hell - deadly, dangerous and expensive. But just how expensive is it?

In a recent interview, Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz asserted that the costs of the Iraq war - budgetary, economic and societal - could reach US$5 trillion.

That's a hard number to comprehend. Figuring out how many times $5 trillion would circle the globe (if we took it all in $1 bills) doesn't really help matters much, nor does estimating how many times we could paper over every square inch of Rhode Island with it. The fact that total war costs could buy six trillion donuts for volunteers to the presidential campaigns - assuming a bulk discount - is impressive in its own way, but not all that meaningful either. In fact, the George W. Bush administration's war costs have already moved beyond the human scale of comprehension.

But what if we were to try another tack? How about breaking those soaring trillions down into smaller pieces, into mere millions and billions? How much, for instance, does one week of Bush's wars cost?

Glad you asked. If we consider the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan together - which we might as well do, since we and our children and grandchildren will be paying for them together into the distant future - a conservative single-week estimate comes to $3.5 billion. Remember, that's per week!

By contrast, the whole international community spends less than $400 million per year on the International Atomic Energy Agency, the primary institution for monitoring and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons; that's less than one day's worth of war costs. The US government spends just $1 billion per year securing and destroying loose nuclear weapons and bomb-making materials, or less than two days' worth of war costs; and Washington spends a total of just $7 billion per year on combating global warming, or a whopping two weeks' worth of war costs.

So, perhaps you're wondering, what does that $3.5 billion per week actually pay for? And how would we even know? The Bush administration submits a supplemental request - over and above the more than $500 billion per year the Pentagon is now receiving in its official budget - to pay for the purported costs of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and for the global "war on terror." If you can stay awake long enough to read the whole 159-page document for 2008, it has some fascinating revelations.

For example, to hear the howling of the white-collar warriors in Washington every time anyone suggests knocking a nickel off administration war-spending requests, you would think that the weekly $3.5 billion outlay is all "for the troops." In fact, only 10% of it, or under $350 million per week, goes to pay and benefits for uniformed military personnel. That's less than a quarter of the weekly $1.4 billion that goes to war contractors to pay for everything from bullets to bombers. As a slogan, insisting that we need to keep the current flood of military outlays flowing "for Boeing and Lockheed Martin" just doesn't quite have the same ring to it.

You could argue, of course, that all these contracting dollars represent the most efficient way to get our troops the equipment they need to operate safely and effectively in a war zone - but you would be wrong. Much of that money is being wasted every week on the wrong kinds of equipment at exorbitant prices. And even when it is the right kind of equipment, there are often startling delays in getting it to the battlefield, as was the case with advanced armored vehicles for the US Marine Corps.

But before we get to equipment costs, let's take a look at a week's worth of another kind of support. The Pentagon and the State Department don't make a big point - or really any kind of point - out of telling us how much we're spending on gun-toting private-contract employees from companies like Blackwater and Triple Canopy, our "shadow army" in Iraq, but we can make an educated guess.

For example, at the high end of the scale, individual employees of private military firms make up to 10 times what many US enlisted personnel make, or as much as $7,500 per week. If even one-tenth of the 5,000 to 6,000 armed contract employees in Iraq make that much, we're talking about at least $40 million per week. If the rest make $1,000 a week - an extremely conservative estimate - then we have nearly $100 million per week going just to the armed cohort of private-contract employees operating there.

Now, let's add into that figure the whole private crew of non-government employees operating in Iraq, including all the cooks, weapons technicians, translators, interrogators and other private-contract support personnel. That combined cost probably comes closer to $300 million per week, or almost as much as is spent on uniformed personnel by the air force, army, navy and marines.

By one reliable estimate, there are more contract employees in Iraq alone - about 180,000 - than there are US troops. There are thousands more in Afghanistan. But since many of these non-military employees are poorly paid subcontract workers involved in cooking meals, doing laundry and cleaning latrines, the total costs for the services of all private-contractor employees in Iraq probably runs somewhat less than the costs of the uniformed military. Hence our estimate.

So, if $650 million or so a week is spent on people, where does the other nearly $3 billion go? It goes for goods and services, from tanks and fighter planes to fuel and food. Most of this money ends up in the hands of private companies like Boeing, Lockheed Martin and the former Halliburton subsidiary, Kellogg, Brown and Root.

The list of weapons and accessories paid for from our $3.5 billion is long and daunting:

$1.5 million for M-4 carbines (about 900 guns per week).
$2.3 million for machine guns (about 170 per week).
$4.3 million for Hellfire missiles (about 50 missiles per week).
$6.9 million for night vision devices (about 2,100 per week).
$10.8 million for fuel per week.
$5 million to store and transport that fuel per week.
$14.8 million for F-18E/F fighter planes per week (one every four weeks).
$23.4 million for ammunition per week.
$30.7 million for Bradley fighting vehicles (10 per week).

And that's only a very partial list. What about the more mundane items?

"Laundries, showers and latrines" cost more than $110,000 per week.
"Parachutes and aerial delivery systems" cost $950,000 per week.
"Runway snow removal and cleaning" costs $132,000 per week.
Flares cost $50,000 per week.

Some of these figures, of course, may cover worldwide military operations for the US armed forces. After all, by sticking the acronym GWOT (global war on terror) in the title of any supplemental war-spending request, you can cram almost anything into it.

Then there are the sobering figures like: $2.4 million per week for "death gratuities" (payments to families of troops killed in action) and $10.6 million per week in "extra hazard pay."

And don't forget that all the death and destruction lurking behind these weekly numbers makes it that much harder to get people to join the military. But not to worry, $1 million per week is factored into that supplemental funding request for "advertising and recruitment" - not enough perhaps to fill the ranks, but at least they're trying.

Keep in mind that this only gives us a sense of what we do know from the public Pentagon request; there's plenty more that we don't know. As a start, the Pentagon's breakdown of the money in its "emergency" supplemental budget leaves huge gaps.

Even your own congressman doesn't know for sure what is really in the US war budget. What we do know is that the Pentagon and the military services have been stuffing more and more projects that have nothing to do with the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, or even the "war on terror," into those war supplementals.

Layered in are requests for new equipment that will take years, or even decades, to build and may never be used in combat - unless the Iraq war really does go on for another century, as Republican presidential nominee John McCain recently suggested. These "non-war" items include high-tech armored vehicles and communications devices for the army as well as new combat aircraft for the air force.

Even though these systems may never be used on the US's current battlefields, they are war costs nonetheless. If they weren't inserted into the supplemental requests for Iraq and Afghanistan, they might never have been funded. After all, who wants to vote against a bill that is allegedly all "for the troops," even if it includes weapons those troops will never get?

These add-ons are not small change. They probably cost in the area of $500 million per week.

Given all of this, it may sound like we have a fair amount of detail about the costs of a week of war. No such luck. Until the "supplemental" costs of war are subjected to the same scrutiny as the regular Pentagon budget, there will continue to be hundreds of millions of dollars unaccounted for each and every week that the wars go on. And there will be all sorts of money for pet projects that have nothing to do with fighting current conflicts. So don't just think of that $3.5 billion per week figure as a given. Think of it as $3.5 billion ... and counting.

Doesn't that make you feel safer?

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