

# War Torn

**The soaring cost of the Afghanistan conflict has begun to divide GOP deficit-cutters from traditional supporters of defense spending.**

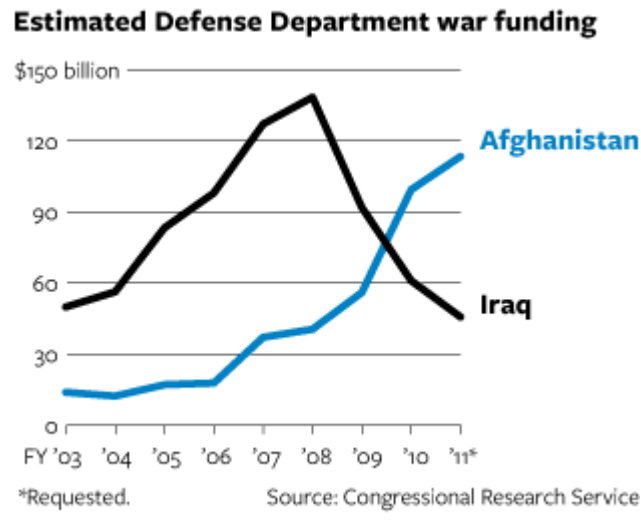
By [Yochi J. Dreazen](#)

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When President Obama made a surprise trip to Afghanistan last month, he focused on the rising human cost of the long war there. Looking out over a packed auditorium, Obama noted that many had lost friends among the 499 service members killed during the fighting in 2010. “Progress comes at a high price,” he told the troops. “So many of you have stood before the solemn battle cross, display of boots, a rifle, a helmet, and said good-bye to a fallen comrade.”

Back in Washington, a more prosaic aspect of the war is upsetting politicians: its skyrocketing price tag. Last fall’s Republican landslide—which brought dozens of new deficit hawks to Capitol Hill—means that more lawmakers than ever are open to slashing the titanic annual sum spent on the conflict. “We can’t pay our own bills here at home, but we’re spending billions of dollars a month to uphold a corrupt government in Kabul,” Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., said. The growing unease over limitless military spending could undermine support for Obama’s Afghan strategy.

The partisan divide over Afghanistan has never been as pronounced or as vitriolic as the one that existed with Iraq; Obama has often referred to Afghanistan as “the war we need to fight.” But the divisions between parties deepened after the president in December 2009 announced plans to send 30,000 more U.S. troops there. Congressional Republicans strongly backed the move, and many prominent Democrats openly opposed it.



The new concerns about the financial cost of the war—projected to hit about \$113 billion this year alone—are scrambling those partisan fault lines. Some of the loudest skeptics are now Republicans, particularly those elected with tea party backing. Two of them, Jones and Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, are planning a lunch meeting for next month with more than a dozen of their new GOP colleagues to win support for spending less on the conflict. “We’re already 10 years into this war, and we can’t afford 10 more years of spending money that we don’t have,” Jones said.

Speakers will include retired Army Maj. Gen. John Batiste, the author of an open letter to Obama arguing that the current strategy can’t win the war; Richard Haass, a Bush-era State Department official who opposes a large military footprint in Afghanistan; and antitax crusader Grover Norquist, who has emerged as one of the most prominent Republican grumblers about the price. Norquist said he hopes Republicans can have an “adult conversation” about the war. “Advocates for the status quo, and those who got us here, are strangely unwilling to discuss the virtues of their policy and the benefits that flow to America as compared with the costs,” he said.

Jones said he hoped the upcoming lunch—and meetings with new members—would help fuel a GOP-led push to cut costs. “We’re beginning to see a lot more support for our views within the ranks of the Republican Party itself,” he said. Accordingly, a recent poll by the Afghanistan Study Group points to growing unease on the political Right about the war’s price. The survey found that 67 percent of conservative men and 75 percent of conservative women were concerned about the costs. Those worries extended across every age group.

Not all attitudes are changing. House Speaker John Boehner, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, and other GOP leaders believe that the war should be exempted from any future budget-cutting moves. Many Republicans even want the administration to keep troops in Afghanistan into 2014, well past its self-imposed July 2011 deadline for beginning the drawdown.

The libertarian Cato Institute said this week that just 5 percent of the 289 Republican members of Congress support cutting defense spending; no Republican senators and just 4 percent of GOP representatives oppose the war in Afghanistan. The think tank said that newly elected Republican lawmakers were generally just as pro-war and pro-defense spending as their more experienced colleagues. "The tea party isn't mellowing GOP militarism," Cato analyst Benjamin Friedman said.

Still, many Republican lawmakers openly admit that the war's cost will soon force the party to decide between its emphasis on deficit reduction and its traditional support for defense spending. A recent study by the Congressional Research Service found that between June 2009 and June 2010, monthly Pentagon spending in Iraq fell from \$7.2 billion to \$5.4 billion, while the monthly costs in Afghanistan soared from \$3.5 billion to \$5.7 billion. The CRS study estimated that the Pentagon spent at least \$751 billion in Iraq and \$336 billion in Afghanistan between fiscal 2001 and 2010. "Now we will see how strong the antispending mood is, how important deficit reduction is," Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, the ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said recently.

Worry about the costs seems likely to emerge as an area of common ground between like-minded lawmakers from both parties. Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., said he was working closely with Paul and Jones, noting that "politics makes strange bedfellows." If antiwar members of both parties can strip support, Obama may be forced to change course. But as McGovern acknowledged in an interview, "It is politically difficult to end a war."

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