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Free Wars are Dumb Wars

| [More](#) ^[1]

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| [Benjamin H. Friedman](#) ^[2]



A myth has developed that funding U.S. wars outside the normal defense budget process is the norm. Even super-veteran *Washington Post* reporter Walter Pincus, [writing](#) ^[3] last week about the cost of bombing Libya, implied that there is nothing unprecedented about using supplemental appropriations to fund wars that last nearly a decade:

Unforeseen military operations that require expenditures such as those being made for the Libyan effort normally require supplemental appropriations since they are outside the core Pentagon budget. That is why funds for Afghanistan and Iraq are separate from the regular Defense Department budget.

Actually, U.S. military actions have traditionally been funded within the normal defense budget or moved into it once the spending was foreseeable. That was the case for Vietnam. And, as the Congressional Research Service notes [here](#) ^[4], Congress in the mid-1990s began funding U.S. peacekeeping in the Balkans and the no-fly zones over Iraq in the base defense budget, using an “Overseas Contingency Operations Transfer Fund.”

Keeping war funds outside the normal defense budget has several pernicious consequences.

First, it prevents prioritization of military programs and thus atrophies strategic thinking. Supplementals, in part because they appear temporary, are not seen as part of the defense budget. Politically, it's easier to increase total spending by the cost of the supplemental than to increase the defense budget by that amount. So, putting war funding in the Pentagon budget means that other defense programs get cut to make way, heightening tradeoffs ^[5] among military objectives. That requires strategy. Robert Gates brags about forcing the Pentagon to sacrifice long-term priorities to fund today's wars. But what's extraordinary is the limited nature of his efforts and the Pentagon's ability ^[6] to avoid changing its priorities amidst two wars.

Second, because war costs and standard defense costs are not truly separable ^[7], the war supplemental becomes a slush fund for other defense accounts. The supplemental hides the real cost of defense by exaggerating the portion of it that is temporary.

Third, the prior two factors limit the extent to which the military services' bureaucratic imperatives ultimately turn them against war. Instead of paying for some of the wars out of their preferred programs, supplementals give those programs a spending boost.

If strict spending limits are in place and funds can be transferred across discretionary categories, supplementals shift the cost of wars from within the Pentagon to other domestic programs. That makes Republicans—who are generally eager to cut these programs—more likely to support war and Democrats more likely to object. Absent such caps, supplementals shift costs onto taxpayers or future ones .

Prior to Vietnam, Congress generally ^[8] raised taxes ^[9] to fund wars. That is typical in international history and explains why "war made the state ^[10]." War taxes also prevent taxpayers from getting the sense that wars are free and thus from cavalierly supporting them.

Those in favor of endless war should be happy with deficit-financed war supplementals. By keeping the cost of war off present ledgers, supplementals, combined with deficits, prevent the formation of anti-war interests. But with the draft gone and the military prevented by professional norms from complaining much about war, we already lack concentrated peace interests.

We should therefore not only fund wars in the normal defense budget, but force those funds to be offset by spending cuts elsewhere in the budget or by tax increases. That is the purpose of a bill ^[11] Senator Al Franken is set to introduce. Similar legislation, sponsored ^[12] by Senator Russ Feingold, passed the Budget Committee as an amendment last year but did not go to the floor.

Conservatives are likely to balk at this legislation because it opens the possibility of tax increases. But the failure ^[13] of the "starve the beast" theory indicates that deficits will not turn people against spending, but taxes might ^[14]. Without costs they can feel, democracies cannot meaningfully evaluate policies. Wars that seem free are likely to be

foolish.

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