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## THE HILL'S Congress Blog

Where lawmakers come to blog

### The Big Question: Paying for Afghanistan

By Eric Zimmermann - 10/30/09 09:13 AM ET

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Some of the nation's top political commentators, legislators and intellectuals offer their insight into the biggest question burning up the blogosphere today.

**Today's question:**

Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) has said policymakers need to offset the costs of any new troops in Afghanistan, adding that raising taxes should be seriously considered. Do you agree?

Some background reading [here](#).

**John Hostettler**, former Indiana GOP congressman (1995-2007), said:

Why can President Obama not pay for a "surge" in Afghanistan by keeping his campaign promise to get us out of Iraq? An accelerated withdrawal from Iraq would be appreciated by the Iraqi people who have requested time and again that they be allowed to vote on such a referendum that would supersede the status of forces agreement. Even more important, the full complement of 40,000 additional troops recommended by Gen. McChrystal could then be cycled into the Afghanistan theater of operation as personnel coming home from Iraq would replace those sent to carry out that desperately undermanned mission. There would be no need for a tax increase and the treasury would be drained less by the net savings of the elimination of the Iraq mission. But once again even more important would be the savings in lives and the fact that Commander in Chief Obama would be called on less to attend those sorrowful ceremonies at Dover Air Force Base.

**Malou Innocent**, foreign policy analyst at [The Cato Institute](#), said:

Absolutely not. The Constitution calls for appropriations to raise and support an army, but this money should only be spent on missions that are well defined and vital to our national security interests. Raising taxes to pay for a war in which the objectives are far beyond the original mission is not justified. Despite the announced goals of the administration, it now seems we are paying for a state-building mission that does little to increase America's domestic security.

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The argument for raising taxes to pay for a troop increase in Afghanistan rests on the war's core assumption: remaining in Afghanistan keeps America safe from terrorism. But there is little evidence to support this. As recounted by Paul Pillar, former deputy chief of the counterterrorist center at the CIA from 1997 to 1999, "The preparations most important to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks took place not in training camps in Afghanistan but, rather, in apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain and flight schools in the United States." Defeating al Qaeda is a must, but sending more troops to Afghanistan is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to achieve that objective.

**Michelle D. Bernard**, President and CEO of the [Independent Women's Forum](#), said:

So Rep. John Murtha—famous for steering taxpayer money to useless projects in his district—is suddenly a deficit hawk. Let's put this in perspective: The Wall Street Journal recently [ran an op-ed](#) written by Reason's Tyler Grimm about the lifetime of waste that is Rep. Murtha's legacy:

*In 20 years, Mr. Murtha has successfully doled out more than \$150 million of federal payments to what is now being called the airport for no one....*

*There are a total of 18 flights per week, all of which go to Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C. I was visiting the airport from Washington, but because flights cost a pricey \$400, I drove. The drive took less than three and a half hours and cost about \$35 in gas—not to mention that it was arguably faster than flying. And this isn't a remote area of the state: Murtha airport is less than two hours from the Pittsburgh airport.*

*The airport has an \$8.5 million, taxpayer-funded radar system that has never been used. The runway was paved with reinforced concrete at a cost of more than \$17 million. The latest investment was \$800,000 from the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to repave half of the secondary runway. (Never mind that the first one is hardly ever in use.)*

If Congress Murtha is really interested in offsetting the costs of funding troops, then he should begin by eliminating idiotic earmarks like those he has championed. He might also remember that providing for the national defense is actually one of the things that the federal government is supposed to do. It's a legitimate use of taxpayer money, unlike just about every other proposal that is being championed by the current Democrat leadership.

Of course, the primary reason not to raise taxes to fund the war efforts is that we are in the midst of a recession with an unemployment rate that approaches double digits. Raising tax will discourage consumption, work and investment—it's the wrong direction for the economy. It's a terrible policy recommendation coming from anyone, but it's ridiculous coming from this messenger.

**Paul Kawika Martin**, Political and Policy Director for [Peace Action](#), said:

I think the question should be: How much U.S. credit should we use on the war in Afghanistan? As it stands, the over \$230 Billion we have already spent has mostly been borrowed money adding to the U.S. deficit. Of course, just like buying a car or home, sometimes it's good to do things on credit. But this isn't the true cost. As Noble Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and Harvard professor Linda Bilmes points out, that figure fails to include interest on debt, veterans benefits and other costs to society. They estimate the costs for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could top a staggering \$5 trillion to \$7 trillion.

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Perhaps we should be asking: What is the objective that we are paying for and what are we getting for the blood and treasure spent? Remember, The U.S invaded Afghanistan to stop Al-Qaeda and bring Osama bin Laden to justice. General Jones claims that Al-Qaeda numbers are less than 100 in Afghanistan and are of little threat to the U.S. How much money are we going to spend to capture one person who is probably not in the country?

I think that our objective should be to transition our resources from military assets to more diplomatic, economic and aid investments. Rather than the \$40 billion it would cost to send 40,000 more troops, there are better ways to spend our tax dollars for a stable Afghanistan that will make Americans safer. An approximate 40% unemployment and illiteracy rate helps fuel recruits for the Taliban and violent extremists. More spending on jobs programs and education may secure the country more than Predator drone strikes which tend to kill, injure and terrorize innocent civilians.

Of course, Afghans need their own security forces, which is a complicated matter. On my recent trip to Afghanistan, many credible sources told me how Afghan police and forces receive only \$100 - \$200 per month in salary. For many, this is not a living wage and encourages bribe taking and desertion. This is especially true when you can make as much as \$500 working with the Taliban. So, for the \$1,000,000 a year it costs to send one U.S. soldier, we could increase the pay of 200 Afghan security forces to Taliban levels. This would decrease corruption and possibly increase recruitment.

It's clear to that Americans can't afford to pay for decades of occupation and for the hundreds of thousands of troops it would take to secure the country militarily. Instead, investing in rebuilding the country through Afghan-led NGOs, dealing with poverty, and participating in a political process which would include a comprehensive peace process with internal and external power brokers could bring long-term stability and an environment less hospitable to the Taliban and violent extremists.

To really answer the question, the high cost of both wars are already on the backs of our grandchildren and if raising taxes mitigates that burden, we should.

**John McManus**, president of the [John Birch Society](#), said:

John Murtha is the congressman who vociferously called for withdrawal of forces from Iraq a few years ago. He earned rebukes from many of his colleagues and seems now to have adopted the establishment position. His suggestion that taxes ought to be raised to fund adding more U.S. forces to wage the war in Afghanistan is quite a change. What ought to be done, instead, is bring the troops home. Maybe Pennsylvania's voters will decide to send earmark-king Murtha home.

**Glenn Reynolds** of [Instapundit](#) said:

Considering all the money being spent already, via everything from the \$24,000-a-pop Cash For Clunkers debacle to the \$2.2 million *per word* healthcare "reform" bill, I think that the expense of Afghanistan is just a drop in the bucket.

We could probably finance it just by cutting out [shady earmarks](#). At any rate, when Murtha's willing to forgo some of the pork for which he's been so justly [mocked](#), then I'll believe that there's a real fiscal crisis.

As it is, he reminds me of the old Las Vegas joke:

Man #1: "Hey buddy, can you loan me \$10,000 for my mom's operation?"

Man #2: "How do I know you won't just gamble it all away?"

Man #1 (looking offended): "I've *already* got *gambling* money."

**Dean Baker**, co-director of the [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#), said:

Given the hysteria over the potential economic cost and job loss that could result from measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it is absolutely astounding that no one ever seriously debates the economic impact of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and other military spending. This is close to criminal negligence.

If we step behind the deliberate obfuscation, in the standard economic models that we all use, higher military spending and reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions both impact the economy in the same way. In both cases, we are pulling resources away from their most efficient (narrowly defined) best uses.

In the case of military spending, we are effectively taxing the productive economy to pay for weapons, soldiers and other activities that do not directly produce items that can be consumed, or investment goods. Of course, we do not literally raise taxes, but in normal times, deficit spending has the same effect on the economy as a tax increase. (This is not true now, when deficits are virtually free money because the economy has so much idle capacity and unemployed labor.) To reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we are taxing people to get them to use less energy.

There is a massive ad company whining that measures to reduce GHG emissions will wreck the economy, and many members of Congress make the same claim. However, the exact same economic models would show that the increases in military spending that we have seen to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan result in far more damage to the economy and far greater job loss than the proposed measures to reduce GHG emissions.

If we had an anti-war movement or an environmental movement in this country, they would be making this point and pressing the media to report on it.

**Tom McClusky**, senior vice president of [FRC Action](#), said:

Such offsets are desperately needed, but not in the form Rep. Murtha suggest. Every year billions of taxpayer dollars are spent on frivolous special projects, wasted on government junkets or simply lost. Rep. Murtha himself directed hundreds of millions of dollars to his friends and to an airport that bears his name but receives few passengers.

Perhaps Rep. Murtha would decide that the tax money being directed for the John Murtha Airport might be better spent protecting our fighting forces overseas.

## Comments (8)

Are our involvements in those areas important (whether or not critical) to the ongoing security of the U.S.? If not, what has changed in those elements affecting our security? If so, is the security of the nation a principle function of the federal government under our Constitution? Are the other functions now being directed by Congress, education, mortgage availability, healthcare, etc., etc, principle functions? Redirect, Your Honor?

BY **R RICHARD SCHWEITZER** on 10/30/2009 at 12:31

Did Dean read the question, or just activate a generic talking point?

BY **ASST VILLAGE IDIOT** on 10/30/2009 at 12:37

"...we are effectively taxing the productive economy to pay for weapons, soldiers and other

activities that do not directly produce items that can be consumed, or investment goods."Interesting - and I also support your call end deliberate obfuscation. A few quick questions: What do the troops and defense industry workers do with all that money now? Should all money be used only to "directly produce items that can be consumed, or investment goods", or are there other approved uses for money?What should be done with those goods after they've been produced?I'd like to see his new economic system fleshed out a bit more.

BY **GREYHAWK** on 10/30/2009 at 13:21

"In the case of military spending, we are effectively taxing the productive economy to pay for weapons, soldiers and other activities that do not directly produce items that can be consumed, or investment goods."Interesting. I also support your condemnation of "deliberate obfuscation". A few quick questions:What do military members and defense industry workers currently spend all that money on?Should all money be used only to directly "produce items that can be consumed, or investment goods", or are there other approved uses for money?What will be done with those goods once they've been produced?I'd like to see this new economic system fleshed out a bit more.

BY **GREYHAWK** on 10/30/2009 at 13:26

All you need to know about Dean is that his web site hopes that the Communist Zelaya will be returned to the presidency, the post from which he was legally deposed due to his unconstitutional abuse of power.

BY **CLAUDE HOPPER** on 10/30/2009 at 13:48

John Hostettler:We are not paying for the Iraq war. Even a simpleton like me knows we are paying for the Iraq war is funded by borrowing and increasing the national debt. Geez!

BY **JN7854** on 10/30/2009 at 19:47

Stiglitz and Bilmes proved that the wars have many hidden costs, such as taking care of veterans, replacing military equipment, paying interest on the debt, and so forth. But the Congress doesn't seem to budget for these costs, so they stay hidden and add to the deficit. Why doesn't Nancy Pelosi ask CBO to estimate the FULL costs of all these wars and then we can decide whether to have a "patriot tax" like Paul Krugman suggested, or to issue bonds or whatever. Even assuming that it is necessary to continue fighting in Afghanistan, it cannot possibly be sensible to keep financing all these wars with overseas debt.

BY **JMBKEMBLE** on 10/30/2009 at 21:35

The real battle field is here in our country and the casualties here are all too soon forgotten. Our troops are where they need to be doing what needs to be done. support them and give them what they need to achieve there objectives. Stop trying to turn this country into the old soviet union.

BY **J4CK B. N1MB3L** on 11/01/2009 at 21:04

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