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What Price War?

Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Costs of Conflict

Anthony Gregory

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Introduction

In the decade since 9/11, the U.S. government has pursued a national security policy that has been exceedingly costly in blood and treasure. Even before, U.S. defense spending was high by world standards, due in part to frequent interventions beyond the nation's borders, and after 9/11 the spending and casualties have mounted precipitously.

There are no indications that our national security policies will change in the near future. Within a day of announcing that it found and killed al Qaeda head Osama bin Laden, the Obama administration maintained that the war on terrorism would continue.¹ Moreover, both the U.S. government and al Qaeda have warned that bin Laden's death could elicit retaliatory attacks by the terror network.²

In any event, it appears that bin Laden's death will not signal a rapid reduction of defense spending or an accelerated withdrawal of U.S. forces abroad. Although some of the government's activities since 9/11 were useful in locating bin Laden, it appears that much of it had little to do with this narrow goal, the completion of which was relative-

ly inexpensive and has so far not marked a major shift in policy. Should the administration decide to change course in the coming months, it is still important to look back at the last ten years and assess the costs of U.S. defense and foreign policy.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been the most expensive and deadly for the United States since the Cold War, and in particular since Vietnam. Many Americans saw this as a consequence of the particular policy approach taken by the George W. Bush administration, and many expected that the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy, especially in Iraq but also in general terms, would change incontrovertibly, if not completely, once Barack Obama became president and had time to implement his changes. Now, more than two years into Obama's presidency, it is time to examine the new administration's record in Iraq and Afghanistan and its general approach to foreign policy and the war on terrorism. In doing so, we should compare what has happened to what was promised, as well as to what was undertaken during the last administration.

Promises of Change

While running for the U.S. presidency in 2008, then Senator Barack Obama repeatedly criticized President George W. Bush's foreign policy. In particular, he argued that the Iraq war had been a disastrous mistake and that an orderly withdrawal was in America's interest. Obama's critique focused on the human costs of the war, the U.S. military's overstretch, the strain on relationships with U.S. allies, and, last but not least, the financial burden. A characteristic position paper stated:

The Iraq war has lasted longer than World War I, World War II, and the Civil War. More than 4,000 Americans have died. More than 60,000 have been injured and wounded. The United States may spend \$2.7 trillion on this war and its aftermath, yet we are less safe around the globe and more divided at home. With determined ingenuity and at great personal cost, American troops have found the right tactics to contain the violence in Iraq, but we still have the wrong strategy to press Iraqis to take responsibility at home, and restore America's security and standing in the world.³

In vowing to "go through the federal budget, line by line, eliminating programs that don't work," Obama emphasized in his campaign infomercial that "one of the biggest savings we can make is to change our policy in Iraq."⁴

Meanwhile, Obama echoed the campaign position of 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry⁵ on Afghanistan by arguing that the Bush administration had neglected this front in the war on terrorism. Whereas on Iraq, the Obama campaign was anti-war compared to Bush and Republican candidate John McCain, it was distinctively more pro-war and pro-U.S. intervention on the question of Afghanistan. Although many of the president's supporters have expressed disappointment that the Obama administration

has taken such a decisively hawkish stance on Afghanistan, there was no reason to be surprised—unless it was expected that the Obama campaign was lying. In a major piece of campaign literature, the Obama/Biden campaign asserted:

Obama has been calling for more troops and resources for the mission in Afghanistan for years. Obama and Biden will refocus America on the greatest threat to our security—the resurgence of al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁶

In particular, the Obama campaign drew a link between the folly of Iraq and the neglected reality of Afghanistan:

The decision to invade Iraq diverted resources from the war in Afghanistan, making it harder for us to kill or capture Osama bin Laden and the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Nearly seven years later, the Taliban is resurgent in southern Afghanistan while al Qaeda has used the space provided by the Iraq war to regroup, train and plan for another attack on the United States. 2008 was the most violent year in Afghanistan since the invasion in 2001. The scale of our deployments in Iraq continues to set back our ability to finish the fight in Afghanistan, producing unacceptable strategic risks.

The promise to reorient attention and resources from Iraq to Afghanistan was concisely summarized on the next page, under the heading "Get on the Right Battlefield":

Obama will end the war in Iraq responsibly and focus on the right battlefield in Afghanistan. He will deploy at least two additional combat brigades and \$1 billion in additional non-military aid to Afghanistan. He will condition U.S. military aid to Pakistan on their making progress to close down train-

ing camps, evict foreign fighters and prevent cross border attacks. He will ensure U.S. military aid provides the Pakistani Army the training and capability to go after the Taliban and al Qaeda. If the United States has actionable intelligence on the location of high value terrorist targets like Osama bin Laden and Pakistan will not or cannot act on it, the United States will.

Consistent throughout Obama's campaign was this view that the Afghanistan war had been neglected, the Iraq war was a costly error, and the U.S. should withdraw from Iraq in order to save money, restore national honor, and refocus its efforts on Afghanistan. Two years into his presidency, we can assess his largest foreign policy promises—to withdraw from Iraq and send more troops to Afghanistan—both on their own terms and by the standard of whether they have achieved what was promised.

Troops in Iraq

In December 2008, lame duck President George W. Bush signed the Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)⁷, setting a timetable for withdrawal. U.S. troops were now scheduled to leave Iraq's cities by June 30, 2009, and the country as a whole by the end of 2011.⁸ Thus, President-elect Obama's promises to gradually but steadily withdraw from Iraq were already established U.S. policy by the time he came to power in January 2009.

In Obama's February 2009 speech at Camp Lejeune, Obama announced a plan to withdraw all troops by the end of 2011.⁹ To reiterate, this was essentially the policy Bush had agreed to two months earlier, although many commentators spoke as though Obama's Iraq policy signaled a break from his predecessor's. Furthermore, the president made no reference to the Vatican-sized embassy, the seemingly permanent U.S. bases, or the personnel re-

quired for the protection for these bases, including military contractors and troops charged with training the Iraqi military. He did mention the continuing presence, for the time being, of "non-combat troops"—although without a clear explanation of what these troops would be doing.

Obama's unveiling of a withdrawal schedule that had already been declared U.S. policy was not the first time Obama demonstrated solidarity with the Bush administration on Iraq. Although Obama, as a state senator, spoke out against the Iraq war before it began, by 2004 he found himself resigned to the administration's posture on how to move forward with the occupation. Obama was famously quoted in a *Chicago Tribune* article on June 27, 2004, remarking: "There's not much of a difference between my position on Iraq and George Bush's position at this stage."¹⁰ Almost three years later, the Senator defended his consistent votes to continue funding the war in Iraq:

I have been very clear even as a candidate that, once we were in, that we were going to have some responsibility to make it work as best we could, and more importantly that our troops had the best resources they needed to get home safely.¹¹

In the last months of his presidential campaign, Senator Obama told anchorman Bill O'Reilly on Fox News that the notorious Iraq "surge"—a questionable plan¹² involving troop escalation devised by General David Petraeus and implemented in the face of Democratic criticism¹³—had in fact "succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."¹⁴ Nevertheless, having assumed the presidency, Obama has criticized his predecessor on Iraq policy, especially the choice to go to war.

So far, the drawdown is largely on schedule. In November 2007, at the height of the surge, there were 170,300 U.S. troops in Iraq. There were over 144,000 when Bush left office in January 2009. Since May 2003 and until the end of

the Bush presidency, there were at all times well over 100,000 troops in Iraq. This number dipped to 98,850 in April of 2010 (see Appendix A). By August, the number dropped to below 50,000—the lowest it had been since the U.S. invaded in March 2003.¹⁵

Perhaps Obama deserves some credit for following through with this plan so far, but it should never be forgotten that he has not expedited the policy of withdrawal beyond what was already set in motion by Bush. To complicate matters, Defense Secretary Gates has floated the idea of a prolonged U.S. presence past 2011.¹⁶ As of this writing, Gates is reportedly about to pressure Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and other Iraqi officials to decide whether to support an extension allowing a U.S. troop presence beyond the end of the year.¹⁷

Troops in Afghanistan

Obama argued that the tradeoff for a high troop presence in Iraq had been an insufficient presence in Afghanistan. He has rectified this alleged imbalance. While overseeing the reduction of ground forces in Iraq, in accordance with his campaign promises, Obama has greatly increased the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Before 2006, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan hovered between 10,000 and 20,000, with the exception of a peak in July 2005. Beginning in 2006, the number began to rise, although slowly. But at the end of the Bush administration in early 2009, there were fewer than 33,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan (see Appendix A).

On numerous occasions, Obama has announced an increase in U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. In February 2009 he announced that 17,000 more soldiers and Marines would deploy to Afghanistan.¹⁸ In November, he announced another 30,000 troops to deploy by mid-2010.¹⁹

Obama's infusion of more troops into Afghanistan has been compared to Bush's "surge" strategy in Iraq, although we should note that some

have pressured the president to increase the troop presence even more. Republican politicians have accused Obama of "dithering" for his supposedly lackadaisical troop deployments,²⁰ and in mid-2010, even the top U.S. general in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, scandalously spoke out publicly, saying more troops were needed than Obama was willing to commit.²¹ McChrystal has since resigned and retired.

In any event, within eight months of the Obama presidency, there were more than twice as many U.S. troops in Afghanistan as when Bush left office. As of June 2010, there were 91,775 U.S. troops there—58,975 more than at the end of the Bush presidency. This represented nearly a threefold increase, with four to five times as many troops stationed in Afghanistan as were there during the first five years of the war (see Appendix A).

All in all, the combined U.S. troop presence in both countries increased in Obama's first year and has only declined from its peak by about one-fourth as of this writing (see Figure 1). Perhaps we could give credit to the president for this decline, although given the troop levels when he took office we would probably expect fewer troops in Afghanistan now if not for the president's active focus on the nation. This is all putting aside the reality of military contractors, to be discussed later.

U.S. Fatalities in Iraq and Afghanistan

As U.S. troops in Iraq have reduced in number, so too have the fatalities. The United States' bloodiest years in Iraq, 2004 and 2007, saw 849 and 904 U.S. deaths, respectively. In 2009 the number dropped to 149, and in 2010 there were 60 U.S. troop deaths in Iraq—less than 10 percent of the average number of U.S. troop deaths in Iraq per year of war under George W. Bush (see Table 1).

At the same time, U.S. fatalities have only increased in Afghanistan. Before Obama took office,

2008 was the deadliest year for the United States, with 155 deaths. An average of 88 American troops died in Afghanistan per year in the period between 2002 and 2008. Since Obama’s escalation of the war, the figure has skyrocketed. In 2009, 317 died and in 2010, 499 died—more than three times the number during the bloodiest year of war in Afghanistan under George W. Bush, and more than five and a half times the average number of fatalities during that period (see Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, although the total number of U.S. deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2010 was significantly smaller than the total number dead in each of the four years from 2004 through 2007, more U.S. troops have died in Iraq and Afghanistan combined in 2010 than in 2001, 2002, 2003, or 2008.

The prospect for a truly dramatic decline in U.S. casualties appears contingent on a more complete withdrawal from both wars. Moreover,

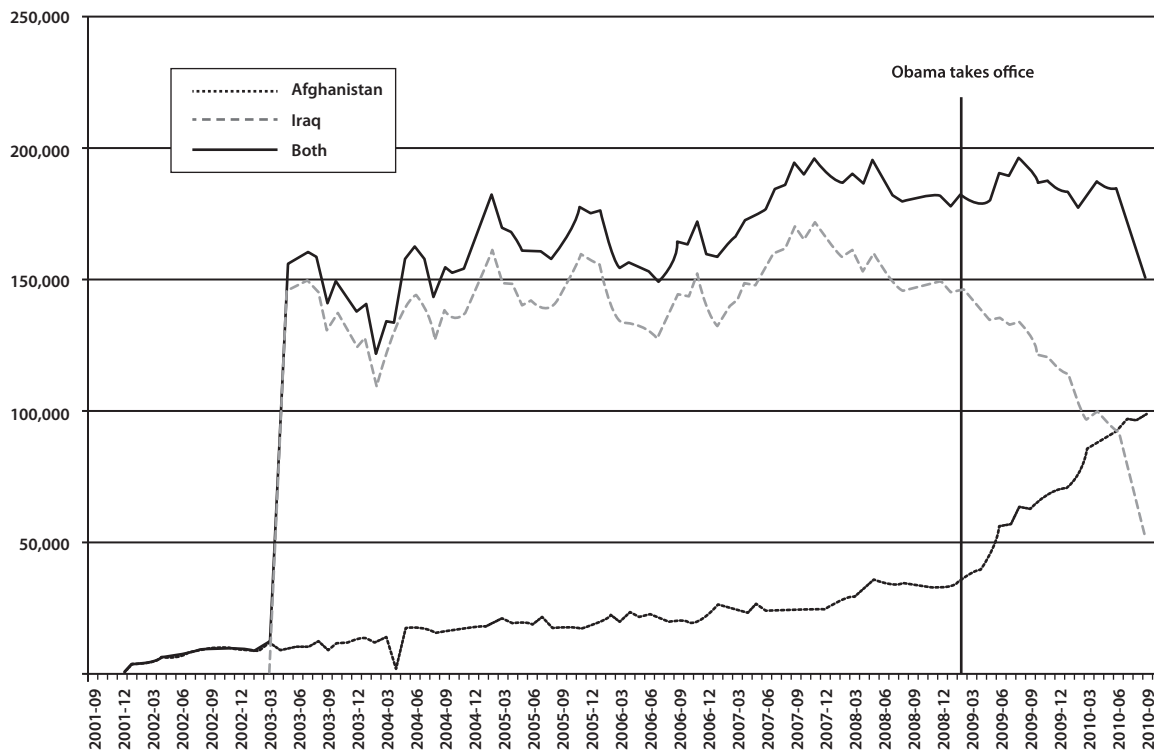
there is the running risk that other events, such as heightened conflict with Syria or Iran, could vastly complicate the problem.

Contractors and Civilian Employees

Aside from U.S. troops, there are also private contractors—both Americans and others—employed by the United States in its occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. During the Bush years, the use of private contractors was a matter of major controversy. But under Obama, the use of contractors has increased in both wars. As journalist Jeremy Scahill reported in June 2010:

According to new statistics released by the Pentagon, with Barack Obama as commander-in-chief, there has been a 23% increase in the number of “Private Security Contract-

Figure 1: U.S. Troop Presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Total



Source: Graph created based on Iraq and Afghanistan data from Appendix A.

tors” working for the Department of Defense in Iraq in the second quarter of 2009 and a 29% increase in Afghanistan, which “correlates to the buildup of forces” in the country. In Iraq, the Pentagon attributes the increase to better accounting. But, these numbers relate explicitly to DoD security contractors. Companies like Blackwater and its successor Triple Canopy work on State Department contracts and it is unclear if these contractors are included in the overall statistics. This means, the number of individual “security” contractors could be quite higher, as could the scope of their expansion.

Overall, contractors (armed and unarmed) now make up approximately 50% of the “total force in Centcom AOR [Area of Responsibility].”²²

As of January 2011, the Defense Department reports there are 87,483 contractors in Afghanistan and 71,142 in Iraq. The data is somewhat inconclusive, as the official reported number of contractors has fluctuated dramatically in just a matter of months²³ (see Table 2).

It should be noted that the vast majority of these contractors are not U.S. citizens. Although that might placate some Americans, we should also note that these figures only include Defense Department contractors and not officials working under other such agencies as the State Department, which by the end of 2011 is scheduled to have in Iraq a staff of “17,000 people, the vast majority of whom will be contractors.”²⁴

Private contracting has allowed the government to obscure the wars’ costs in blood. Between 2001 and June 2010, 2,008 civilian contractors have reportedly died in the wars, compared to 5,531 troops. When Obama has gone on record touting the reduction in U.S. fatalities, he neglected to mention “the contractor personnel now dying in their place,” says professor Steven

Table 1. U.S. Military Fatalities in Afghanistan and Iraq, Per Year

Year	Afghanistan	Iraq	Total
2001	12		12
2002	49		49
2003	48	486	534
2004	52	849	901
2005	99	846	945
2006	98	822	920
2007	117	904	1,021
2008	155	314	469
2009	317	149	466
2010	499	60	559
Total	1,446	4,430	5,876

SOURCE: Calculated from data gathered at <http://icasualties.org/>.

Schooner of George Washington University Law School.

Comparatively, the death toll among contractors has risen against that of U.S. troops. In the first half of 2010, 250 civilian contractors died in Iraq and Afghanistan—more than the 235 soldiers who fell during the same period. This comparison assumes the accuracy of these numbers, yet the contractor fatalities figure may very well be deceptively low, since the companies for which the contractors work sometimes do not report deaths and injuries to the Labor Department.²⁵

Despite flaws in the data, it seems clear that there has been an overall trend of an increased presence in these two countries since Obama took office, even as troop numbers decline in Iraq (and increase in Afghanistan).

Meanwhile, the overall number of civilian employees in the Defense Department has risen under President Obama. The number of full-time equivalent employees has increased from a peak of about 665,000 under President Bush to an estimated 760,000 under President Obama for the year 2011 (see Appendix B).

Table 2. Defense Department Contractors in Iraq, Afghanistan, and USCENTCOM (January 2011)

	Total Contractors	U.S. Citizens	Third Country Nationals	Local/Host Country Nationals
Afghanistan Only	87,483	19,381	21,579	46,523*
Iraq Only	71,142	19,943	40,776	10,423
Other USCENTCOM Locations	17,536	8,387	8,134	1,015
USCENTCOM AOR	176,161	47,711	70,489	57,961

*The reported number of local national personnel in Afghanistan continues to fluctuate as we address the challenges associated with the day-to-day employment of individual contractors supporting contracts which meet reporting threshold requirements.

Source: "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility, Iraq, and Afghanistan," DASD, January 2011. Available online at http://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/hot_topics.html.

War and Defense Spending

A key component of Obama's critique of Bush's foreign policy was its enormous expense. By withdrawing from Iraq, Obama promised to save money, which could be used for domestic priorities and to help relieve America's debt problems.²⁶

The Iraq war is indeed costing less per year than it did under Bush. For FY2008, the U.S. spent more than \$140 billion in the Iraq war—the highest expenditure, in fact, since the war had begun. The direct cost of U.S. involvement in Iraq had dropped each year since Obama has taken office—it was \$95.5 billion in FY2009 and \$71.3 billion in FY 2010 and is projected to be \$49.3 billion in FY 2011 and \$17.7 billion in FY 2012 (see Appendix C).

At the same time, spending on Afghanistan has sharply increased. The most expensive year during the Bush presidency was in FY2008, with a price tag of \$43.5 billion. In FY2009, that number rose quickly to \$59.9 billion. In FY2010 the war was costing the United States \$93.8 billion, and the cost is projected to be \$118.6 billion for FY2011 and \$113.7 billion for FY2012.

Adding together the costs of the two wars, the U.S. is now spending more than it did except in

2007 and 2008, the most expensive years under George W. Bush. Spending for most years under Bush was less, in terms of financial costs for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, than the current war price tag under Obama (see Appendix C).

One might counter that these figures are deceptive because of inflation. There are flaws with the Consumer Price Index²⁷ and it is difficult to apply annual CPI figures smoothly to budget items calibrated for the fiscal year, but a rough adjustment of these figures to account for CPI inflation can be found in Table 3.

Even in constant 2011 dollars, total war spending has still been considerably higher under Obama in FY2009 (\$159.21 billion) and FY2010 (\$170.49 billion) than in all but the last two years of Bush, the peak of Bush's war spending (\$181.52 billion and \$189.94 billion for FY2007 and FY2008, respectively). The estimated war costs for 2011 (\$167.9 billion) are 72.8 percent higher than the war costs in FY2003, the year of the Iraq invasion, even adjusted for inflation. The U.S. government spent more on Iraq in FY2010 than it did in FY2003 (see Table 3).

Even with a charitable look at the data, today's war spending is very high compared to most years under Bush. And if the Afghanistan spending

had merely followed inflation since 2008 while the Iraq spending had declined as it has (and as it would have anyway, assuming the U.S. had followed the SOFA), projected spending for the two wars in FY2011 would be \$93.7 billion—a striking 79 percent lower than the projected \$167.9 billion Obama is expected to spend.

And this assumes the Iraq spending to be at the projected amount of \$49.3 billion for FY2011. Shockingly, the U.S. government is still spending about as much in Iraq per year as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld predicted the war would cost in January 2003, before the invasion. Rumsfeld had cited a budget office “number that’s something under \$50 billion,” claiming that oil revenues would help cover the cost of the military operations and hold down the cost to American taxpayers.²⁸

Beyond the huge dollar amounts involved, there is the matter of how the wars are financed. In February 2009, President Obama boasted, in accordance with past campaign promises, that he would not, as President Bush had, use off-budget gimmicks to obscure the cost of the wars:

This budget looks ahead ten years and accounts for spending that was left out under the old rules—and for the first time, that includes the full cost of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. For seven years, we have been a nation at war. No longer will we hide its price.²⁹

Despite this promise to keep war spending on budget, several months later in June, Obama pushed through a supplemental spending bill that included \$106 billion for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as well as \$108 billion for the International Monetary Fund, \$660 million in aid for Gaza, \$555 million for Israel, \$310 million for Egypt, \$300 million for Jordan, \$420 million for Mexico, and \$889 million for UN peacekeeping missions.³⁰

In January 2010, Obama requested a record-

breaking defense budget of \$708 billion for fiscal year 2011.³¹ Obama’s Defense Secretary Robert Gates has since proposed a number of reforms to reduce overhead costs and save \$100 billion over five years—but the main idea is to direct the savings to other defense spending priorities, such as force structure, improving combat readiness, and modernizing equipment.³² For fiscal year 2012, the administration has requested \$671 billion, which is about 5.5 percent lower than its request the year before, but still over 14 percent higher than Bush’s last request for FY 2009, amounting to \$585.4 billion for the Defense Department budget plus additional war on terrorism expenses.³³ Without a substantial change in foreign policy, U.S. defense spending will continue to rival that of the rest of the world combined.³⁴ Even without dramatic changes in U.S. foreign policy and American commitments overseas, the Deficit Commission and various independent institutions have found ways to reduce defense spending by up to \$100 billion per year,³⁵ but there is little sign that the administration plans to implement even these moderate cuts anytime soon.

As economist Robert Higgs has argued, the official defense budget does not account for all of U.S. spending on defense—for example, the nuclear weapons programs at the Department of Energy. Defense Department outlays in 2009 amounted to \$636.5 billion. But this does not include defense-related expenditures at the Department of Energy (\$16.7 billion), State Department and related programs (\$36.3 billion), Department of Homeland Security (\$51.7 billion), Department of Veterans Affairs (\$95.5 billion), Treasury Department—which houses the Military Retirement Fund (\$54.9 billion)—or NASA, much of which is military-oriented (\$9.6 billion); nor does it count the national debt’s interest that corresponds to past defense spending (\$126.3 billion). Higgs estimates the actual cost of national defense for FY 2009 to be over a trillion dollars.³⁶ Similarly high figures can be found in the budget ana-

Table 3: Estimated War Funding by Operation: FY2001–FY2011 (in billions of dollars, adjusted for inflation in constant 2011 dollars, as of Feb 2011)

Operation/ Source of Funding	FY01 and FY02*	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11	Cum Enacted: FY01- FY11
Iraq		63.43	88.49	96.41	110.99	139.35	145.35	98.03	71.54	49.3	862.89
Afghanistan	25.46	17.59	16.90	22.55	20.76	41.64	44.49	61.08	96.75	118.6	465.82
Enhanced Security	15.91	9.57	4.31	2.37	.87	.53	.102	.103	.103	.1	33.86
Unallocated	0	6.58	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6.58
Total	41.4	97.17	109.7	121.33	132.62	181.52	189.94	159.21	170.49	167.9	1369.15
Annual Change	NA	135%	13%	10.6%	9.3%	36.9%	4.6%	-16.2%	7%	-1.5%	NA
Change Since FY03	NA	NA	13%	24.9%	36.5%	86.8%	95.5%	63.8%	75.5%	72.8%	NA

* Calculated using FY02 metrics.

Note: CPI years and budget fiscal years might be off by a few months, but this chart is still illustrative of trends with inflation.

Source: Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11," Congressional Research Service, March 29, 2011, p. 3. Consumer Price Index inflation calculated using the Bureau of Labor Statistics's Inflation Calculator, available online: http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm. See Appendix C.

lysis of defense spending expert Winslow Wheeler of the Center for Defense Information. Overall, Obama's plans even for nominal defense spending alone exceed those of Ronald Reagan, the Republican president most famous for high defense spending. According to historian Thomas Woods, "Between 2010 and 2013 Obama plans to spend \$2.47 trillion on the Pentagon. Were he to be re-elected, he intends to spend another \$2.58 trillion. The combined total of \$5.05 trillion is a whopping \$840 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars, more than was spent by the Gipper himself."³⁷

Obama Starts a New War with Libya

On March 19, 2011, the eight-year anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Obama administration, along with NATO allies, began bombing Libya

in a military undertaking called Operation Odyssey Dawn. Obama claimed the immediate purpose was to stop Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi from conducting a massacre of rebels and other civilians in the country's eastern city of Benghazi.

About a week after Operation Odyssey Dawn began, Obama addressed the nation in a televised speech, defending his action as being a humanitarian rescue effort as well as in the interests of U.S. national security. Defense Secretary Robert Gates had said that Libya "was not a vital national interest to the United States, but it was an interest."

In 2007, as a presidential candidate, Obama told the *Boston Globe*: "The president does not have the power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation. . . . History has shown us time and again . . . that military action is most

successful when it is authorized and supported by the legislative branch.”³⁸ Yet he did not seek congressional authorization to begin a war with Libya. Indeed, in a closed hearing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted that the administration would continue its military operations in Libya even in the face of a congressional resolution calling on it to end.³⁹

Although Obama announced that NATO would take over the bulk of operations, the U.S. provides most of the muscle and funding for this alliance. According to Norm Dicks, the senior Democrat on the defense appropriations subcommittee in the House of Representatives, Operation Odyssey Dawn had cost \$550 million dollars as of the end of March, and was projected to cost about \$40 million a month.⁴⁰ On May 12, Defense Secretary Gates estimated that the cost of the Libya war had reached \$750 million to date.⁴¹

Meanwhile, Obama has signed an order allowing for CIA support of the rebels in Libya, whose commander has admitted to having ties with al Qaeda, the terrorist organization implicated in the 9/11 attacks, and which has offered assistance to the Libyan rebels.⁴²

Army General Carter Ham, who led the U.S. mission prior to NATO’s official takeover of operations, said on April 7 that because Gaddafi was hiding military targets behind civilian areas, the U.S. might consider sending in ground troops, despite Obama’s repeated claims that no U.S. troops would be deployed on the ground in Libya.⁴³

Following Bush’s Path on Foreign Policy and the War on Terrorism

By beginning a new, preventive, non-defensive war in Libya without consulting Congress, by failing to accelerate the Iraq withdrawal process established under Bush, and by aggrandizing the war in Afghanistan, Obama’s foreign policy appears to be very much in line with Bush’s war

on terrorism in terms of overall approach and practice. Yet, in running for president, Obama ran against the Republican’s foreign policy legacy. Despite his hawkishness on Afghanistan, the Senator from Illinois gave the impression that the two Bush terms had been aberrations in an otherwise mostly admirable American history. However, this critique was never a principled non-interventionist one, but rather a condemnation of Bush’s recklessness and unilateralism that allegedly distinguished Bush from the United States’ interventionist foreign policy traditions. As president, Obama credits the U.S. for having “underwritten global security for more than six decades.”⁴⁴ In his March 28, 2011 speech on Libya, Obama declared that

[F]or generations, the United States of America has played a unique role as an anchor of global security and as an advocate for human freedom. . . . To brush aside America’s responsibility as a leader and—more profoundly—our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different.⁴⁵

This seems somewhat at odds with the criticism of the Republicans by then-candidate Obama in 2008 when he had intoned that “the Bush-McCain foreign policy has squandered the legacy that generations of Americans—Democrats and Republicans—have built.” The candidate promised that “as commander-in-chief, [he] will never hesitate to defend this nation, but [he] will only send our troops into harm’s way with a clear mission and a sacred commitment to give them the equipment they need in battle and the care and benefits they deserve when they come home.”⁴⁶

There can be a logical consistency in upholding intervention in principle while criticizing Bush’s

application of that principle. Yet many of Obama's major criticisms of Bush would seem to apply to his own foreign policy. It is appropriate to judge the president's record partly in terms of how well he has restored America's policies status quo ante Bush.

Perhaps the first sign that we would not see much of a break in policy came when Obama announced that he would retain Bush's Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Moreover, Obama's original choice as commander of the International Security Assistance Force was Stanley McChrystal, a general embroiled with controversy for having blocked the Red Cross from accessing U.S. prison camps and for his role in covering up the truth behind Pat Tillman's death.⁴⁷ This choice hinted at a possible continuity of U.S. foreign policy between the last administration and the current one.

The tragedy of the Iraq war, as Obama had argued, lay in the fact that it was unnecessary. The rationale for the continuing and escalating war in Afghanistan rests on similarly dubious ground. Whether it is to vanquish the illegal drug trade or eliminate al Qaeda, which the administration itself has claimed only has about 100 members inside Afghanistan, the war, now in its tenth year, has no successful end in sight. If Obama was right that Iraq diverted necessary resources from bringing Osama bin Laden to justice, the critique would seem to apply to Afghanistan as well. Furthermore, the whole counterinsurgency is arguably counterproductive—defense analyst Ivan Eland argues that “the U.S.-led nation-building occupation in Afghanistan is fueling the Taliban resurgence. If you follow the timelines, increases in Western forces have brought about the Taliban renaissance.”⁴⁸ The insurgents are likely just waiting out the U.S. presence, and the Taliban's support among many Afghans renders it all the more difficult for the U.S. to overthrow them as a policy goal.

And the cost in manpower and dollars is incre-

dible: Journalists at ABC News noted that “with 100,000 troops in Afghanistan at an estimated yearly cost of \$30 billion, it means that for every one al Qaeda fighter, the U.S. will commit 1,000 troops and \$300 million a year.”⁴⁹ In addition, the U.S.-backed leader of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, has recently called the United States an “enemy,” and has said: “If I had to choose sides today, I'd choose the Taliban.”⁵⁰

With the death of bin Laden, many have pushed for a rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan, but this hopeful lobbying would appear to assume that the administration's policy in that country was a means to finding bin Laden and not much else. In actuality, the administration's major goals in Afghanistan do not seem achievable at the current pace, as the country's strife concerns many deep-seated issues: its tenuous border with U.S. ally Pakistan, fabricated in the late-nineteenth century by British colonialists and dividing the Pashtun people; an Islamic fundamentalism that has over the years been nurtured by Western meddling; terrible conditions for women's rights that the U.S. government has used as a pretext for intervention but seems incapable of addressing in a lasting manner; and factional and regional politics that the U.S. also seems impotent to handle.⁵¹

Many of Obama's supporters were concerned not just with American fatalities and financial costs, but also with the effect of Bush's war on foreigners' lives and world opinion. These considerations are not absent from Obama's war in Afghanistan. According to many reports, 2009 was the worst year for Afghans since 2001. There were more civilian deaths since the invasion and an increase in air strikes.⁵² Although many of these deaths were at the hands of the Taliban, it still does not speak well for the United States' record of “liberation” and fostering stability there, given that a rise in U.S. troops has been accompanied by a remarkable surge in civilian deaths. As for world opinion toward U.S. global influence, it

has generally improved under Obama, although some of this trend has reversed somewhat in Western Europe. The Arab world, however, still looks upon the United States with suspicion. Egypt has become particularly distrustful and Arabs living in other countries have said they would prefer France, China, Russia or several other nations to be the world superpower rather than the United States. Arab support for Obama's foreign policy took a particularly sharp dive in 2010.⁵³

The administration claims the intention to eventually withdraw all troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, but it has not addressed the question of America's military bases, some of them seemingly permanent, in both countries. Although the Defense Department does not include them in its supposedly comprehensive list of overseas bases, there are at least 88 such installations in Iraq and 400 in Afghanistan.⁵⁴ One U.S. installation in Iraq, while technically not a base—it is referred to as a U.S. embassy and in fact the largest one in the world—is about as big as the Vatican.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, Obama has expanded the war into Pakistan, launching more than 40 drone strikes just in his first year alone,⁵⁶ contributing to the humanitarian crisis wherein up to two million Pakistanis have been displaced from the Swat Valley.⁵⁷ According to the Brookings Institution, ten civilians die for every militant killed in these drone strikes⁵⁸—and this implicitly takes for granted the suggestion that every “militant,” including officers of the Taliban, is a worthy target. The fact that a Special Forces team, not a drone attack, killed Osama bin Laden, further challenges the notion that the use of drones is necessary or desirable in the hunt for actual enemies of the U.S.

In addition to overseeing the expansion of the Af-Pak war, the uncertain withdrawal trajectory in Iraq and a new war in Libya, Obama has bombed Yemen,⁵⁹ which was later cited as the inspiration behind the would-be “Underwear Bomber,” as well as Somalia, which the U.S. also invaded with a small force⁶⁰ and has provided with more than

eighty tons of weaponry—weapons that often ended up in the hands of “insurgents.”⁶¹ The administration threatened to invade Eritrea in April 2009.⁶²

Obama has been inconsistent on Iran, seeming more diplomatic than his predecessor, but at the same time supporting a stiffening of sanctions—a classical act of belligerence. Despite all indications that Iran has not pursued nuclear weapons in violation of the Nonproliferation Treaty, Obama has jumped upon such events as Iran's operations at Qom to criticize the nation for supposedly breaking agreements, despite the lack of hard evidence of such malfeasance.⁶³ In 2007, the National Intelligence Estimate found with “high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program.”⁶⁴ In March, 2009, when Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair was asked whether the U.S. intelligence community still stood by the National Intelligence Estimate, Blair testified:

Mr. Chairman, the nuclear weapons program is one of the three components required for a deliverable system, including the delivery system and the uranium. But as for the nuclear weapons program, the current position is the same, that Iran has stopped its nuclear weapons design and weaponization activities in 2003 and did not—has not started them again, at least as of mid-2007.⁶⁵

In its last several reports on the matter, the International Atomic Energy Agency “continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material in Iran” to military or other non-civilian purposes.⁶⁶

At home and on the human rights front, the war on terror also continues more or less as Bush left it. Obama has embraced Bush's policies of warrantless wiretapping, detention without trial, erosions of habeas corpus, immunity for alleged government torturers, denial of protection for whistleblowers exposing wartime wrongdoing, renditioning,⁶⁷ broad claims of executive secrecy, increasingly invasive airport security measures, a bloated homeland security bureaucracy, and the

legal right of the president to order the assassination of suspects, anywhere on earth, without a shred of due process.⁶⁸ The administration also seems to claim the authority to shape anti-terrorist detention policy without congressional interference, a reversal from candidate Obama's stance toward Bush detention policy.⁶⁹

Conclusions

The Obama administration has shifted focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, but has otherwise maintained the trajectory of U.S. post-9/11 defense policy that was set in motion under the Bush administration. The drawdown in Iraq has been one of the only possible signs of relative restraint, and it is a dubious example, as it has been anything but unconditional, rapid, or unambiguous, and is mostly on course with what the Bush administration formally agreed to at the end of its term. The escalation in Afghanistan has led to a surge in U.S. spending that almost compensates for the reduction in spending seen in Iraq, and U.S. casualties have not declined nearly as much as many Obama proponents had hoped. The financial cost of both wars combined is higher than it was during all but two years of the Bush administration, even adjusted for inflation. It is difficult to predict the financial and human life costs of Obama's new war with Libya, but the way Obama started it, without consulting Congress, presenting a clear agenda or exit strategy, or convincingly explaining its necessity to U.S. national security, does seem to be in tension with many of Obama's critiques of Bush's foreign policy. Although almost all Americans celebrate the death of Osama bin Laden, very little of Obama's policy seems intimately connected to that goal, as is indicated by the administration's determination to continue ahead with the war on terrorism, intervention in Libya, and an aggressive approach to national security overall.

In most particulars, U.S. policy has continued uninterrupted even on such controversial ques-

tions as the use of military contractors, permanent bases, and human rights abuses. In general terms, U.S. policy is as expensive and interventionist as before, and in absolute dollar terms, the U.S. defense apparatus is larger than ever. In fact, a presidency that continued on the path set by the end of the Bush administration, which officially endorsed the drawdown in Iraq but not an escalation in Afghanistan, could very well have meant a more modest footprint, price tag, and cost in American and foreign blood than what, on net, has been produced by the current administration.

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Appendix A: U.S. Troop Presence in Iraq and Afghanistan

Source: Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11." *Congressional Research Service*. September 2, 2010, pp. 42-3. Original sources listed below.

September 2001-September 2010												
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2001												
Afghanistan									0	0	0	0
Iraq									0	0	0	0
Both									0	0	0	0
2002												
Afghanistan	4,100	4,200	5,000	6,600	6,900	7,300	8,900	9,500	10,400	10,500	10,200	9,700
Iraq	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Both	4,100	4,200	5,000	6,600	6,900	7,300	8,900	9,500	10,400	10,500	10,200	9,700
2003												
Afghanistan	9,800	9,500	11,450	9,300	9,900	10,900	10,900	12,700	9,800	12,100	12,000	13,100
Iraq	0	0	0	93,900	145,700	147,400	149,400	146,000	130,300	136,900	131,300	123,700
Both	9,800	9,500	11,450	103,200	155,600	158,300	160,300	158,700	140,100	149,000	143,300	136,800
2004												
Afghanistan	13,500	12,300	14,100	19,500	17,700	17,800	17,400	15,700	16,800	17,500	17,800	18,300
Iraq	126,900	108,400	119,600	131,700	139,800	144,300	140,600	126,800	137,700	134,600	135,900	142,600
Both	140,400	120,700	133,700	151,200	157,500	162,100	158,000	142,500	154,500	152,100	153,700	160,900
2005												
Afghanistan	18,700	20,300	20,900	19,500	20,000	19,200	21,100	17,400	18,000	17,800	17,400	18,500
Iraq	152,300	161,200	147,800	147,900	140,000	141,100	139,300	139,200	143,700	150,000	159,800	156,200
Both	171,000	181,500	168,700	167,400	160,000	160,300	160,400	156,600	161,700	167,800	177,200	174,700
2006												
Afghanistan	20,300	22,700	20,000	23,300	21,800	22,300	20,800	19,700	20,400	19,800	20,500	21,800
Iraq	155,100	139,300	133,500	132,500	132,300	130,300	127,300	133,500	143,400	142,600	151,200	136,900
Both	175,400	162,000	153,500	155,800	154,100	152,600	148,100	153,200	163,800	162,400	171,700	158,700
2007												
Afghanistan	26,000	24,800	24,400	23,900	26,400	23,800	24,000	24,000	24,500	24,400	24,800	24,600
Iraq	131,500	138,300	141,200	147,900	147,400	152,500	159,600	161,400	169,000	164,700	170,300	165,700
Both	157,500	163,100	165,600	171,800	173,800	176,300	183,600	185,400	193,500	189,100	195,100	190,300
2008												
Afghanistan	27,000	28,000	28,800	33,100	35,600	34,000	33,700	34,200	33,500	33,000 ^a	33,000 ^a	32,500
Iraq	160,200	158,100	160,500	152,300	158,900	153,300	147,400	145,100	146,800	147,650 ^a	148,075 ^a	148,500
Both	187,200	186,100	189,300	185,400	194,500	187,300	181,100	179,300	180,300	180,650 ^a	181,075 ^a	181,000
2009												
Afghanistan	32,800	35,900	38,350	39,000	44,700	55,100	56,500	62,600	62,300	65,800	67,500	69,000
Iraq	144,100	146,400	141,300	139,400	134,100	134,500	132,300	132,600	129,200	120,300	119,300	114,300
Both	176,900	182,300	179,650	178,400	178,800	189,600	188,800	195,200	191,500	186,100	186,800	183,300
2010												
Afghanistan	70,200	74,600	85,000	87,600	89,700	91,775	95,925 ^b	95,920 ^b	98,000 ^b			
Iraq	112,400	101,100	95,900	98,850	94,250 ^b	92,000 ^b	78,000 ^b	64,000 ^b	50,000 ^b			
Both	182,600	175,700	180,900	186,450	178,760 ^b	171,070 ^b	163,380 ^b	155,690 ^b	148,000 ^b			

Sources: DOD, Joint Staff, Summary and Monthly Boots on the Ground Reports to Congress; for troops in country through August 2009; interpolated for October and November 2008 and August 2009 because not reported. Estimates for Afghanistan reflect Figure 6-2, "Force Level Assumptions in DoD Budgets," in *DOD, FY2011 Budget Request: Overview*, Feb. 1, 2010; http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2011/FY2011_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

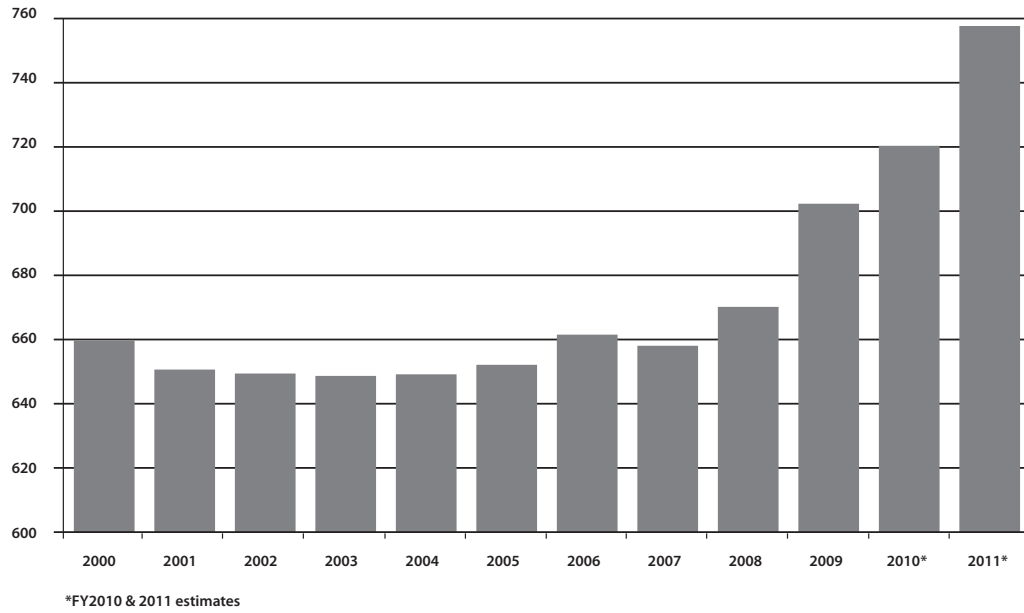
Notes: Estimates for Iraq reflect DOD press conference cited above.

a. DOD did not send Congress reports for Oct. and Nov. 2008 so CRS interpolated these months.

b. CRS estimates for the rest of FY2010 reflect DOD plans for average strength of 84,000 in Afghanistan. CRS estimates for Iraq are based on a DOD, Press Conference of January 27, 2010, where he said that shortly after the elections (on March 7, 2010), "there's going to be a pretty steep drop-off to get down to basically six advise-and-assist brigades, under 50,000 forces." U.S. Status of Forces agreement with Iraq requires that U.S. forces in Iraq are down to 50,000 by August 31, 2010; see also, CRS estimates the months from June to September 2010 by distributing the difference between the reported May 2010 level and the September 2010 endpoint of 50,000 non-combat troops for Iraq and the same method for Afghanistan, distributing the difference between the May 2010 report and the September goal of 98,000.

Appendix B: Civilian Employees in the Department of Defense (thousands of full-time equivalent employees)

Source: President's FY2011 Budget.



Appendix C: Estimated War Funding by Operation: FY2001–FY2012 War Request

Source: Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11,” *Congressional Research Service*. September 2, 2010, p. 3. Original sources listed below.

(CRS estimates in billions of dollars of budget authority)

OPERATION AND SOURCE OF FUNDS	FY01 & FY02	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY2011 CRA P.L. 112-6*	FY2012 Request	Cumulative Enacted, FY01-FY11 as of 3-18-11	Cum. Total w/ FY2011 CRA & FY2012 Request
Iraq	0.0	53.0	75.9	85.5	101.6	131.2	142.1	95.5	71.3	49.3	17.7	805.5	823.2
Afghanistan	20.8	14.7	14.5	20.0	19.0	39.2	43.5	59.5	93.8	118.6	113.7	443.0	557.1
Enhanced Security	13.0	8.0	3.7	2.1	0.8	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	28.6	28.7
Unallocated	0	5.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5.5	5.5
Total	33.8	81.2	94.1	107.6	121.4	170.9	185.7	155.1	165.3	168.1	131.7	1,283.3	1,414.8
Annual Change	NA	140%	16%	13%	13%	41%	9%	-16%	7%	2%	-22%	NA	NA
Change Since FY03	NA	NA	16%	33%	50%	111%	129%	91%	104%	107%	62%	NA	NA

Sources: Public laws, congressional appropriations reports, Department of Defense data, and CRS estimates. CRS budget authority (BA) totals may differ from DOD figures because CRS includes all funding provided in supplementals, bridge funds, continuing resolutions, omnibus, consolidated, and baseline appropriations for Iraq, Afghanistan and other counter-terror operations as well as transfers from DOD’s baseline funds for GWOT requirements beginning with P.L. 107-38, the first emergency supplemental after 9/11 through the FY2010 request. CRS calls Operation Noble Eagle, Enhanced Security because these funds provide higher security at DOD bases, support combat air patrol, and rebuilt the Pentagon. CRS includes additional \$2 billion in BA in FY2003 included by DOD in its tally but not in DFAS obligations; source of funds unclear. CRS splits the \$25 billion provided in the FY2005 Title IX bridge between the \$1.8 billion obligated in FY2004 and the remainder available for FY2005; all those funds are scored as FY2004 because they were available upon enactment in August 2005. CRS estimates for DOD reflect obligations reported in DOD’s Defense Finance Accounting Service (DFAS) reports, *Supplemental & Cost of War Execution Reports* and budget justification materials including DOD, *FY2007 Supp.*, February 2007, Table 1a.; http://www.dod.mil/comptroller/defbudget/fy2008/fy2007_supplemental/FY2007_Emergency_Supplemental_Request_for_the_GWOT.pdf; DOD, FY2008 Supplemental Requests, February, July, and October 2007, and DOD, *Overseas Contingency Operations Request, FY2009 Supplemental: Summary Justification Material*, April 2009, p. 81 and other data; http://www.defenselink.mil/comptroller/defbudget/fy2009/Supplemental/FY2009_Supplemental_Request/pdfs/FY_2009_Supplemental_Request_04-08-09.pdf. CRS excludes items that are clearly not war-related including for example, \$5.2 billion in FY2007 and \$8.0 billion in FY2008, for example, for higher fuel prices for DOD’s regular program, base closure funding, and childcare centers, hospitals, medical facilities, and Army barracks renovation funds in the United States. Foreign operations figures include monies for reconstruction, development and humanitarian aid, embassy operations, counter narcotics, initial training of the Afghan and Iraqi army, foreign military sales credits, and Economic Support Funds. See also CRS Report R40699, *Afghanistan: U.S. Foreign Assistance*, by Curt Tarnoff. Updates of foreign aid from State Department, U.S. Foreign Assistance, Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Summary Tables, Fiscal Year 2012, Feb. 2011; and FY2012 budget justification. Updates of diplomatic operations provided by State Department. Updates for VA Medical reflect CRS estimates of shares for OIF and OEF veterans based on applying troop shares to totals shown in Department of Veterans Affairs, FY2012 budget justification materials; Updated to reflect enactment of FY2011 Continuing Resolution (H.Res. 48/P.L. 112-6) and DOD, State Department and VA FY2012 budget justification materials.

About the Author



ANTHONY GREGORY is Research Editor at The Independent Institute, and he is currently writing a book on individual liberty and the writ of habeas corpus.

He has written hundreds of articles that have appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, *BusinessWeek*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Washington Times*, *Portland Oregonian*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, *Tallahassee Democrat*, *Albany Times-Union*, *Raleigh News and Observer*, *Contra Costa Times*, *The Star* (Chicago, IL), *Vacaville Reporter*, *Palo Verde Times*, and other newspapers; as well as in *Human Events*, *Counterpunch*, *American Conservative*, *Alternet*, *Anti-war.com* and the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*. He also regularly writes for numerous news and commentary web sites, including LewRockwell.com, and the Future of Freedom Foundation. He earned his bachelor's degree in American history from the University of California at Berkeley, giving the undergraduate history commencement speech in 2003.



Leviathan and *Against Leviathan*, Independent Institute Senior Fellow Robert Higgs shows that the main reason for this growth lies in government's responses to national "crises" (real or imagined). The result is ever increasing government power which endures long after each crisis has passed, undermining both civil and economic liberties and economic growth, and fostering extensive corporate welfare and pork.

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