

## Healthcare vs. Warfare: The Future Costs of the Afghanistan War

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*By Jeff Leys*



On Wednesday, President Obama will address a joint session of Congress on health care. Later this year he will decide whether to deploy additional troops to the war in Afghanistan, in addition to the 69,000 troops already deployed. The struggle for health care and the struggle to end warfare are inextricably linked. The cost for substantive (though imperfect) health care reform as envisioned in the House of Representatives approach (with the public option) is projected to average \$100 billion per year for the next 10 years. The cost to continue the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are projected to cost anywhere from \$55 to \$100 billion a year. Make a few modest reductions to the baseline military budget and the difference is paid.

The choice is clear: healthcare or warfare; the Common Good or Common Destruction.

Two key developments in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars will likely take place this month. Congress will more than likely pass the Defense Appropriations Bill for Fiscal Year 2010 (which begins on October 1) and General McChrystal will likely request that additional troops be deployed to Afghanistan. The Defense Appropriations Bill contains about \$130 billion to wage the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan through September 30, 2010. General McChrystal is expected to request that 15,000 to 45,000 additional U.S. troops be deployed to Afghanistan—bringing overall U.S. troops levels in Afghanistan to 84,000 to 114,000.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes and out of the public eye, the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force are preparing their respective budget requests for FY 2011 (which begins October 1, 2010 and runs through September 30, 2011).

The publication “Inside the Pentagon” reports:

“Now, as the Pentagon weighs the FY-11 base budget and OCO requests submitted by the services on August 14, it is finding the services’ FY-11 OCO requests are larger than expected. Instead of a ‘substantial’ decrease tied to the draw down in Iraq, the OCO total is ‘roughly flat’ compared with FY-10, a Pentagon official said, noting it is only a bit under the FY-10 level.”

In other words, the military services seem to be seeking \$120 to \$130 billion in war funds for 2011, during a time period when ostensibly the U.S. will be reducing troop levels in Iraq and at a time when much is made about the \$100 billion per year projected cost for providing substantive (though not perfect) healthcare reform. (“OCO” is the new term of art for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the abbreviation for Overseas Contingency Operations.)

These initial requests likely will be modified to some extent as they wind their way through the Department of Defense and the White House. However, the size of these requests indicate the importance of current organizing efforts to end funding for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and occupations.

Regrettably, though, it gets worse, as the U.S. will, without substantive troop reductions, likely continue to expend anywhere from \$70 billion to \$100 billion per year to continue on-going military operations in Afghanistan in 2012 and beyond.

The decidedly non-partisan Congressional Research Service (CRS) issued a report in August that projects average monthly troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan through FY 2012 (i.e., through September 30, 2012). It then draws upon the work of the Congressional Budget Office to project future war costs. What emerges is a never ending war with never ending costs unless pressure can be brought to bear upon President Obama and Congress to reverse course in Afghanistan and to maintain the course of troop withdrawal in Iraq.

The Congressional Research Service bases its analysis upon average monthly troop levels over the course of a year rather than numbers of troops on the ground in any given month. For example, if 100,000 troops are deployed to a country for the first 6 months of 2010 but then are reduced to 50,000 troops for the final 6 months of 2010, the average monthly troop level in 2010 is 75,000 troops. Using the monthly average over the course of a year evens out the increases and decreases in troop levels as troops are deployed into and redeployed out of a country.

The CRS projects average monthly troop strength in Iraq with the implementation of President Obama’s troop drawdown. In 2010 it projects average monthly troop strength at 88,300, with the number of troops deployed to Iraq falling to 45,000 troops by August 30, 2010 (reflecting the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces—and, for the moment, leaves aside the question of whether combat forces are truly removed from Iraq or are simply renamed and “retasked”). In 2011 monthly average troop strength falls to 42,750 troops (reaching complete withdrawal of all but a small residual force of about 4000 troops by December 31, 2011).

While arguably the troop withdrawals should occur on a more rapid timetable, pressure must be maintained upon Obama to ensure that he does not allow any slippage to occur in his own proposed timetable. The U.S. could, possibly, maintain a high level of troops in Iraq even after a supposed “withdrawal” of combat troops if remaining troops were to be retasked to other missions and redesignated. Also, a new agreement could be reached with Iraq to maintain a larger U.S. military presence in Iraq beyond the end of 2011.

Second, pressure must be exerted to prevent any expansion of the U.S. military force in Afghanistan and then to reverse troop levels in that country. Approximately 69,000 troops are

currently deployed to Afghanistan. McChrystal will likely seek an additional 15,000 to 45,000 troops. President Obama will most likely decide about troop levels in Afghanistan by the end of this year.

And this is where the wave of substantive (though imperfect) healthcare reform comes crashing upon the shoals of warfare. Keep \$100 billion in mind—the projected cost for each year of healthcare reform—as you read the following based upon reports from the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

In January 2009, the CBO projected the costs of maintaining troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. It updated these projections in August 2009. Caution is in order about drawing too firm a conclusion of war costs based upon these projections. However, the projections do give a very strong indicator of the likely lower end costs of continuing these wars.

The CBO projects that the cost to maintain 112,500 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan in FY 2012 will be \$95 billion. The CBO in January projected that it will cost \$70 billion to maintain 75,000 troops in Iraq and / or Afghanistan from FY 2013 onward (though it lowered this projection to \$55 billion for FY 2014 onward in its August 2009 report, without an explanation for the lower figure). Now use these cost projections of CBO with the troop projections of the Congressional Research Service and you get the following prescription for never ending warfare.

The CRS projects that average monthly troop levels in FY 2011 will be 106,200. Looking at the \$95 billion cost projection of the CBO (for 112,500 troops), one would think that the war costs in FY 2011 will be in the range of \$90 to \$100 billion. Yet, as indicated at the start of this article the military services are apparently seeking funding somewhere in the range of \$130 billion for FY 2011 (or slightly lower). Either way—whether it's in the range of the \$95 billion or so projected by CBO or the perhaps nearly \$130 billion in the military services' initial budget requests—that's more than adequate funding to pay for substantive healthcare reform in 2011.

The financial hemorrhaging will continue for as long as the U.S. maintains military troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Let's assume the CRS projections are correct and the U.S. withdraws all but 4000 troops from Iraq by December 31, 2011 and that the U.S. maintains troop levels in Afghanistan at their current level, without any increase of the sort that General McChrystal may propose.

The long term cost of the Afghanistan war will then likely be in the range of \$55 to \$70 billion per year (with average monthly troop levels of 4000 in Iraq and 67,500 in Afghanistan according to the CRS projections). This is based upon the CBO projection that maintaining a deployment of 75,000 troops will cost somewhere between \$55 billion and \$70 billion per year from 2013 onward (on a slightly more optimistic note, the CBO projects that it will cost somewhere in the range of \$25 billion to \$32 billion per year if U.S. troops levels are reduced to 30,000).

All of this leaves out any discussion of reframing the size of the U.S. military following a decade of great expansion. In June 2001, the U.S. maintained about 26,000 troops in the region. In December 2008 the Department of Defense's Defense Manpower Data Center's "Location Report" stated that 294,000 troops were stationed in the region and assigned to the military

operations in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Of these, 181,000 troops were deployed inside either Iraq or Afghanistan (according to the DoD's "Boots on the Ground Report" for December 2008) President Obama has yet to address his plans for the redeployment of the 100,000 plus troops stationed in the region as the troop drawdown in Iraq commences.

At this moment of critical decision-making we should utilize all legal and extralegal (i.e., nonviolent civil disobedience) methods and techniques to send the strongest possible message to President Obama and Congress that it is time to completely end the U.S. military misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On October 5, nonviolent civil disobedience/civil resistance will take place at the White House. Organized by such groups as the National Campaign for Nonviolent Resistance, Witness Against Torture, War Resisters League and Atlantic Life Community, this effort is an opening salvo in a renewed and revitalized effort to completely end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as to bring the U.S. into full compliance with international law as regards torture and mistreatment of those being held by the U.S. in the erstwhile "war on terrorism". The National Campaign for [Nonviolent Resistance website](#) is with additional information available on the website of the [War Resisters League](#).

The longer term [Peaceable Assembly Campaign](#) is an umbrella effort being coordinated by Voices for Creative Nonviolence in an effort to draw the connections between the continuing pursuit by the U.S. and its allies of on-going Common Destruction in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories on the one hand and the lack of funding for the Common Good—schools, health care, full employment and living wage policies, the public infrastructure, refugee services—on the other hand. The Peaceable Assembly Campaign seeks as well to draw the connections between the ongoing militarization of the United States and the critical necessity to commit our country to a new environmentalism that, amongst other things, makes the strong commitment to a renewable energy policy that is safe for the environment.

The Peaceable Assembly Campaign begins, this fall, with the development of local campaign committees to advance campaign objectives and to lobby Congress regarding these objectives.

In January 2009, the PAC will focus upon President Obama. From January 19 to February 2 we will maintain a daily vigil—which will include daily acts of civil disobedience—at the White House seeking an end to funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This time period is critical for a final attempt to influence President Obama before he submits his budget request for 2011 to Congress. January 19 marks the start of President Obama's second year in office with February 2 being the date by which he is supposed to submit his 2011 budget to Congress, a budget that will include funding for the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

After February 2, the Peaceable Assembly Campaign will once again emphasize legal and extralegal lobbying work to achieve its objectives. The extralegal lobbying work will consist of nonviolent civil disobedience at the offices of Representatives and Senators who do not agree with the objectives of the campaign—and especially who do not commit to cutting off funding for warfare with a concomitant redirection of funds to serve the Common Good. This phase of the campaign is timed to the legislative calendar during which Congress will be developing and

enacting the Defense Appropriations Bill for 2011—a bill which will likely include funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than likely the House and Senate will act upon the Defense Appropriations Bill for 2011 by the end of July 2010. The Peaceable Assembly Campaign can be reached by email ([pac@vcnv.org](mailto:pac@vcnv.org)), by phone (773-878-3815) or on the web (<http://peaceableassemblycampaign.org>).

These next several weeks and months are critical in redirecting our country away from Common Destruction and towards the Common Good. Decisions will be made by President Obama and Congress which could send hopes for health care, education, living wage jobs, a new environmental policy crashing upon the shoals of never ending war in Iraq and Afghanistan. We must insert ourselves into this decision-making process. We cannot afford to not utilize legal and extralegal (civil disobedience) lobbying, tactics and strategies to bring about an end to the Common Destruction being waged globally in our name.

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