

Bush to propose record US war budget

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The Bush administration will seek congressional approval of more than \$700 billion in military spending this year, including \$245 billion to fund the ongoing wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, top officials told the press Friday. The gargantuan funding request will be formally unveiled and sent to Congress Monday.

Bush's war budget includes \$481 billion for the regular Pentagon budget for fiscal 2008, which begins October 1 of this year, together with \$245 billion for the two wars, of which \$100 billion is a "supplemental" appropriation for the current fiscal year, and \$145 billion is for operations in the coming fiscal year. There is also the likelihood of another supplemental appropriation next year, which could send the total over \$800 billion.

The regular Pentagon budget includes \$128.6 billion for the Army, \$110.7 billion for the Air Force and \$140 billion for the Navy (which includes the Marine Corps). It provides at least some funding for every current and planned weapons procurement for all three services. It thus marks an end to efforts, identified with former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, to suspend or cancel outright some weapons programs whose origins lie in the Cold War arms race with the Soviet Union.

When non-Pentagon military spending is included, including the Energy Department, which manufactures nuclear warheads, the CIA, with its substantial paramilitary capability, the Veterans Administration and the Department of Homeland Security, the total amount of US war spending likely already exceeds \$1 trillion—one followed by 12 zeros.

According to most published calculations, the additional spending requested by the Bush administration would bring the overall cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to more in real dollars than was spent by the United States in the Vietnam War, despite the smaller forces involved and the until now much lower death toll. These factors are outweighed by the enormously greater equipment and materials costs of today's high-tech warfare, as well as the much greater per-soldier cost of maintaining a volunteer army, as opposed to the largely draft-based

military of the 1960s.

Moreover, the real commitment of US personnel in Iraq is much greater than the official figure of 130,000, which does not include tens of thousands of US contractors and civilian employees doing jobs that would have been performed by military personnel in Vietnam. Once the Pentagon completes the dispatch of an additional 21,500 combat troops to Iraq, the number of soldiers engaged in front-line combat in Iraq will exceed the number who performed similar duties in Vietnam. (According to published estimates, barely 10 percent of the 550,000 US soldiers at the Vietnam peak were engaged in combat.)

For the people of Iraq, the US invasion and conquest have had a catastrophic impact. Iraqi society has been largely destroyed, and the population subjected to conditions of mass deprivation—denied jobs, access to medical care, even electricity and water—unprecedented in the six decades since the end of World War II. These hellish conditions, the product of the US occupation, are fueling the increasingly bloody conflicts of sect against sect, ethnic group against ethnic group, and within various tribal and other social sub-groups.

American society is not, however, merely a passive observer to the disaster unfolding in Iraq. As the budget numbers begin to suggest, the war in Iraq is having a staggering impact on the social and political structure of American society and will continue to do so for many years to come.

The financial drain is profoundly destabilizing for a country which is no longer the undisputed powerhouse of world capitalism. During the Korean War, military spending accounted for as much as 13 percent of US GDP, but America was still so unchallenged in the world economy that it could sustain that burden, continue the Marshall Plan to rebuild European capitalism and provide significant increases in living standards for the working class at home.

When US imperialism intervened in Vietnam, America was still economically dominant, although it had begun to run a balance of payments deficit, however small by

today's standards. The accumulating costs of the Vietnam War eventually compelled the Johnson administration to abandon its program of social reform (grandly titled the "war on poverty"), and ultimately forced the Nixon administration to devalue the dollar and end dollar-gold convertibility in August 1971.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the first protracted, large-scale overseas military engagement by the United States since Vietnam (the 1991 Persian Gulf war lasting only a few months, and largely funded by the Arab oil despots and Japan). American capitalism is far less able to sustain the financial burden, having become, in the 30 years since Vietnam, a net debtor nation with a balance of trade deficit approaching \$800 billion a year. The continued twin drains of war spending and trade deficits must produce, sooner rather than later, a financial debacle.

Then there is the impact of the war on military manpower. Pentagon figures show that more than 1.3 million Americans have been deployed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. Most soldiers in the regular Army and Marines have done at least one tour of duty in Iraq, and many have done three, four or more. Most Army National Guard and Army and Marine reserve units have done one tour of duty, exhausting their eligibility for such service under current rules.

In a little-publicized announcement at the time of Bush's speech on the "surge" of new troops into Baghdad, the Department of Defense changed its policy limiting Guard and Reserve units to 24 months of continuous active service (only long enough, with preparation and training, for one tour in Iraq). To carry out the buildup ordered by Bush, this limit is to be lifted, initially for specialty units like engineering and intelligence. What this means in practice is that reservists and guardsmen who were discharged after a tour of duty in Iraq can now be remobilized a second time for an additional 24 months, although Pentagon officials said they intended to limit the length of such second tours to 12 months.

This extension of military obligations takes place under conditions where the war has already had a personal impact on large numbers of the American people. According to a Gallup poll last fall, 11 percent of respondents said they had a close friend, family member or co-worker who was wounded or killed in Iraq, while an additional 43 percent had a friend, relative or colleague who had done military service there.

The widening social impact of the war accounts for

much of the growth of popular antiwar sentiment. Despite the incessant pro-war propaganda of the media, and a political system of two right-wing parties, both committed to the "success" of the imperialist conquest of Iraq, the American people have turned sharply against the war.

The most recent Rasmussen poll, released Friday, found that a clear majority, 55 percent, of those responding favored a deadline for withdrawing all US troops from Iraq. That includes 37 percent who favor immediate withdrawal, and 18 percent who want a timetable to withdraw all troops by the end of the current year. This was the first poll to report that immediate withdrawal was the option chosen by the largest proportion of respondents, more than the 33 percent who believed that US troops should remain in Iraq "until our mission is accomplished," the position of the Bush administration.

This mass antiwar sentiment finds no significant expression in the existing two-party political structure, a fact underscored by the response of the Democratic congressional leadership to Bush's military budget. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid issued a statement pledging to provide US troops with "everything they need to do their jobs."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has already ruled out any legislative action that would cut, let alone terminate, funding to sustain the war effort in Iraq, while calling for more funds and troops in Afghanistan. Pelosi played host to Bush at a weekend meeting of the House Democratic caucus, where Bush lauded the patriotism of his Democratic Party "opposition," declaring, "We share a common goal, and that is to keep America safe."



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