The colossal cost of Washington's unending wars

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Sixteen years of war in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria have drained $5.6 trillion from the United States economy, according to a new study entitled "Costs of War" released by the Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs at Brown University.

This staggering figure, which is more than triple the estimate offered by the Pentagon itself, factors in huge costs that the US military does not include when tallying up the bills for its wars. These include medical expenses for wounded and disabled veterans, war-related spending by the Department of Homeland Security, and the increased cost of borrowing money to pay for military operations.

The "Costs of War" report does not include spending on US military operations elsewhere in the world, including the escalating intervention in Chad, Niger and throughout the African continent, US participation in the genocidal Saudi-led war against Yemen, and special operations interventions on virtually every continent.

The cost of the wars dealt with in the report is over and above the annual Pentagon budget of nearly $700 billion—a level of military spending that outstrips the world's next 10 largest military powers combined.

The authors of the report readily acknowledge that the eye-popping $5.6 trillion figure does not begin to cover the immense slaughter, destruction and human misery caused by Washington's wars. They write:

> Moreover, a full accounting of any war's burdens cannot be placed in columns on a ledger. From the civilians harmed and displaced by violence, to the soldiers killed and wounded, to the children who play years later on roads and fields sown with improvised explosive devices and cluster bombs, no set of numbers can convey the human toll of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or how they have spilled into the neighboring states of Syria and Pakistan, and come home to the US and its allies in the form of wounded veterans...

These are, of course, ledgers that are not kept and figures that are not entered into any columns by those responsible for these wars. "We don't do body counts," was the way the Gen. Tommy Franks, the US commander of the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq put it.

Credible estimates, however, have put the number of lives destroyed by the US war in Iraq alone at over one million, while another 175,000 have reportedly been killed in Afghanistan. Many millions more have been wounded and turned into homeless refugees.

The trillions of dollars' worth of destruction wrought by US wars that have decimated entire societies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen are not the subject of the Brown University report. It does, however, provide a sober view of the vast social wealth of the United States itself that has literally gone up in smoke as a result of American militarism—resources that could have been invested in education, health care and raising the living standards of the working class.

Among the steepest long-term costs not included in the Pentagon estimate of war spending are those associated with the damage inflicted on the people sent to fight these wars, who return with physical and mental problems that are woefully underestimated and underserved.

The report cites a Veterans Administration report from May which states that the demand for services from veterans of the US wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan has increased by 215 percent over the past seven years. While officially the number of troops wounded in action in Iraq and Afghanistan totals 52,000—over 1,700 of them suffering limb amputations and 6,500 of them "severe penetrating brain injuries"—this

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figure vastly underestimates the real toll. More one million veterans of these wars are receiving disability payments, with roughly 875,000 of them classified as 30 percent or more disabled.

Fully 327,000 of these veterans had been diagnosed with Traumatic Brain Injury as of August of this year, while roughly one third of those returning from the wars have been diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or other mental health issues.

Reflected in these wars, both in the criminality with which they were initiated and fought, and in the way they were funded, are the financial parasitism and socially destructive forms of speculation that pervade the workings of American capitalism.

The $5.6 trillion figure given by the Brown study as the cost of US wars is almost exactly the equivalent of the US national debt in 2001, on the eve of Washington's launching of its "global war on terror." In the intervening 16 years, that debt has more than quadrupled, attributable in no small part to the ever-growing cascade of military spending.

In an attempt to quell popular opposition to US militarism, successive administrations and Congress have avoided any taxation to pay for the wars, which are fought using "all volunteer" armed forces, consisting in large part of economic conscripts, and with borrowed cash. Instead of including them in the Pentagon's budget, the wars are classified as Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), treated as unforeseeable emergencies after more than a decade-and-a-half of continuous combat.

The price of keeping these military operations "off the books" is a steady rise in the US national debt, whose full weight will be imposed on the backs of the working class through a redoubled attack on living standards and social rights.

According to the report: "Future interest costs for overseas contingency operations spending alone are projected to add more than $1 trillion to national debt by 2023. By 2056, a conservative estimate is that interest costs will be about $8 trillion."

The American oligarchy rakes in billions in profits from the business of war. The Brown University report came out at the same time that Donald Trump was in Asia combining war threats against North Korea with the hustling of arms sales in behalf of US military contractors. Among the retinue of more than two dozen corporate heads accompanying the president were the CEOs of such defense industry giants as Boeing and Bell Helicopter, Textron.

The wars have been initiated and continued by Democratic and Republican administrations alike. Both parties in Congress have maintained this method of funding them, while voting in lock-step for whatever gargantuan budget the Pentagon demands.

Meanwhile, there is the continuous refrain that there is no money for health care, public education, infrastructure and Social Security. The victims of so-called natural disasters such as Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria—whose toll in terms of human suffering is the product of pre-existing conditions stemming from spending cuts, neglect of infrastructure and mass poverty—are left to fend for themselves. Nearly 60 percent of Puerto Rico's 3.5 million people are still without power six weeks after Hurricane Maria struck, and 20 percent lack access to safe running water.

The nearly $6 trillion squandered by Washington on its wars of aggression over the past 16 years is also roughly equal to the combined wealth of the world's billionaires, almost half of which is concentrated within the US.

The threat of Washington's multiple military interventions coalescing into a nuclear third world war is driven by this immense concentration of wealth in the hands of a parasitic oligarchy, which relies on militarism abroad and increasing repression at home to defend its power and privileges.

Only the working class can answer these threats through the mobilization of its independent strength, independently of the Republicans and the Democrats and in opposition to the capitalist system and its state.

The demand must be raised for the dismantling of the vast US military and intelligence apparatus and the redirection of the trillions wasted on slaughter and destruction to meet the social needs of working people in the US and internationally. This must be coupled with a redistribution of the wealth of the super-rich to solve the pressing problems of housing, education, health care and infrastructure, and the placing of the banks and corporations under public ownership to serve human needs rather than the demand for profit.

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