

# The Cost of War

A. Stephen Van Kuiken

*Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.*

*This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children...*

*This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.*

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower

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Reading: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-9

It was about five years ago, now, in late September of 2005, when we piled into buses and headed to Washington, D.C. for an anti-war rally. My bus was filled with enthusiastic students from Xavier University.

It was about a month after hurricane Katrina, and we all still had the tragically inadequate response fresh in our minds. Reports of the diversion of funding to complete the work on the levees in order to funnel more and more money into the military machine provided a symbol as stark as one could ever be.

This inspired me and others to bring homemade T-shirts that said, “Make Levees Not War.” Many of us said that not only was that war unjust, counterproductive and wrong, it also represented a vast drain upon the commonwealth and social fabric of our nation.

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Since then, things have only intensified. The stock market crashed; families lost their savings; pension and college funds dissipated; we have experienced massive unemployment; and millions have lost their homes through foreclosure.

Since then, things have only gotten worse financially. Social needs have increased, but the government's resources have dwindled, decreasing its ability to respond to those needs of the people. Revenues have gone down for both the Federal government, and the states themselves face insolvency, cutting work, hours, jobs and services. Many city and county governments are in the worst shape of all, forced to cut vital services such as libraries, schools, police and programs for the poor.

Tax cuts also went into effect since that march in Washington, primarily for the very top wage earners in this country, removing about \$1.8 trillion in revenue. All of this on top of \$1 trillion to bail out the Wall Street investment firms.

And so the level of pain in this country has increased, while our precious public resources have decreased along with our ability to respond to that pain.

And there is one other aspect to all of this that has not been given nearly the attention it deserves. And that is military spending.

It was over 50 years ago that President Dwight Eisenhower uttered these prophetic words:

*Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.*

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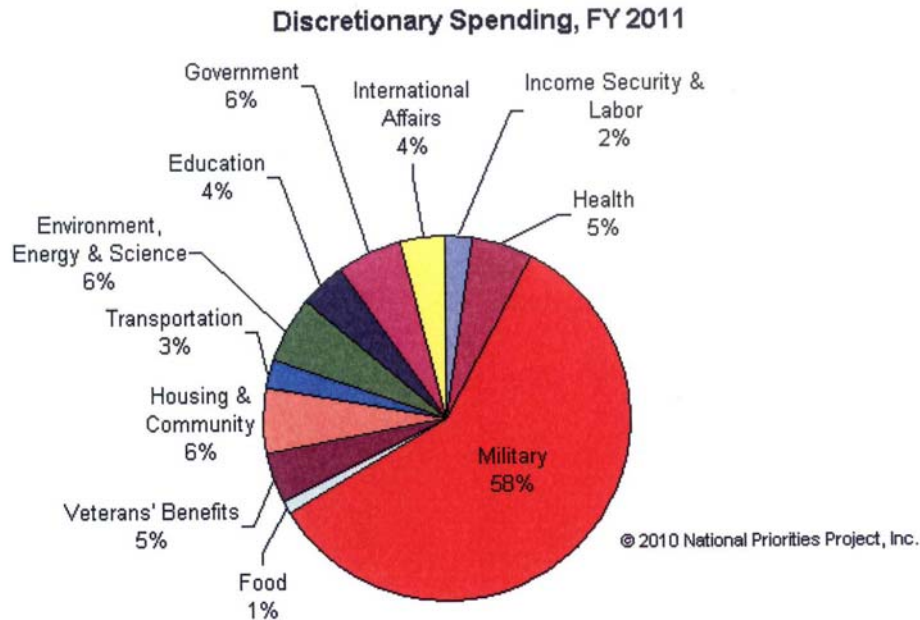
*This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.*

And in his farewell address, he famously said

*We must guard against acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex.*

Now I remind you that this is former five-star general, chief of staff and Republican President *Eisenhower*, and no bleeding heart liberal, who now sounds so prophetic to our ears. We need to talk about this “theft” that Eisenhower was talking about. For far too long, military spending has been taking the lion’s share of our national budget. The numbers are staggering.

According to the National Priorities Project, military spending is at 58% of discretionary spending for next year. With this chart, you can see how small a priority things like responding to poverty are. The Friends Committee on National Legislation estimates only 11% goes to responding to poverty in total— things like assistance with food, housing, education and other essentials for qualifying families.



What does our faith say about this? Some people have rightly pointed out that the federal budget is a *moral document*, that is, it reflects our nation's *moral values*. So it seems to me that we need to ask ourselves, what is this document saying about us?

Jesus said,

*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (Matthew 6:21)

What more appropriate statement for us, as people of faith, is there, as we examine our national budget? Looking at it, where is our heart as a nation?

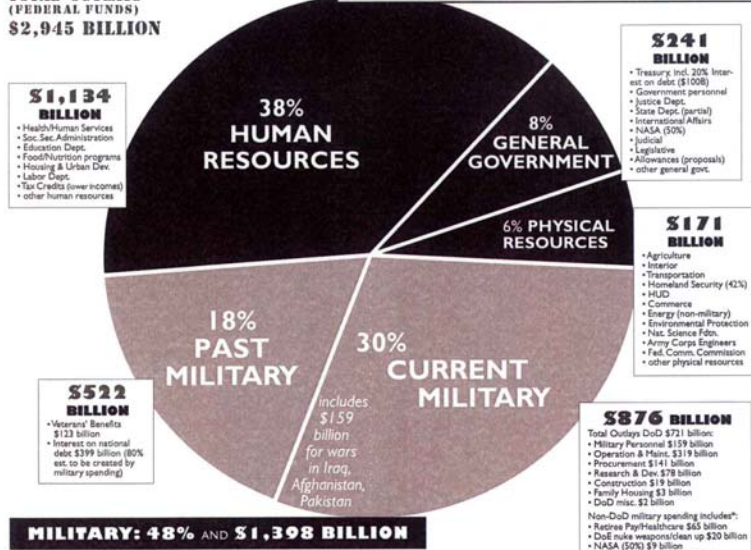
A more middle-of-the-road assessment is this next chart from the War Tax Resister's League, which shows current military spending at 48% of the federal budget, and 18% represents that portion of the national debt for which military expenditures were responsible.

# WHERE YOUR INCOME TAX MONEY REALLY GOES

U.S. FEDERAL BUDGET 2011 FISCAL YEAR

**TOTAL OUTLAYS (FEDERAL FUNDS) \$2,945 BILLION**

**Non-MILITARY: 52% AND \$1,547 BILLION**



**HOW THESE FIGURES WERE DETERMINED**

“Current military” includes Dept. of Defense (\$721 billion) and the military portion from other departments as noted in current military box above (\$155 billion). “Past military” represents veterans’ benefits plus 80% of the interest on the debt.\* For further explanation, please go to [www.warresisters.org](http://www.warresisters.org).

These figures are from an analysis of detailed tables in the *Analytical Perspectives* book of the *Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2011*. The figures are federal funds, which do not include trust funds — such as Social Security — that are raised and spent separately from income taxes. What you pay (or don’t pay) by April 15, 2010, goes to the federal funds portion of the budget. The government practice of combining Trust and Federal funds began during the Vietnam War, thus making the

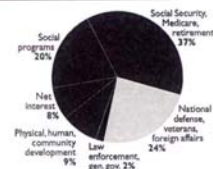
human needs portion of the budget seem larger and the military portion smaller.

\*Analysts differ on how much of the debt stems from the military; other groups estimate 50% to 60%. We use 80% because we believe if there had been no military spending most (if not all) of the national debt would have been eliminated.

### The Government's Deception

The pie chart (right) is the government view of the budget. This is a distortion of how our income tax dollars are spent because it includes Trust Funds (e.g., Social Security), and the expenses of past military spending are not distinguished from non-military spending. For a more accurate representation of how your Federal income tax dollar is really spent, see the large graph.

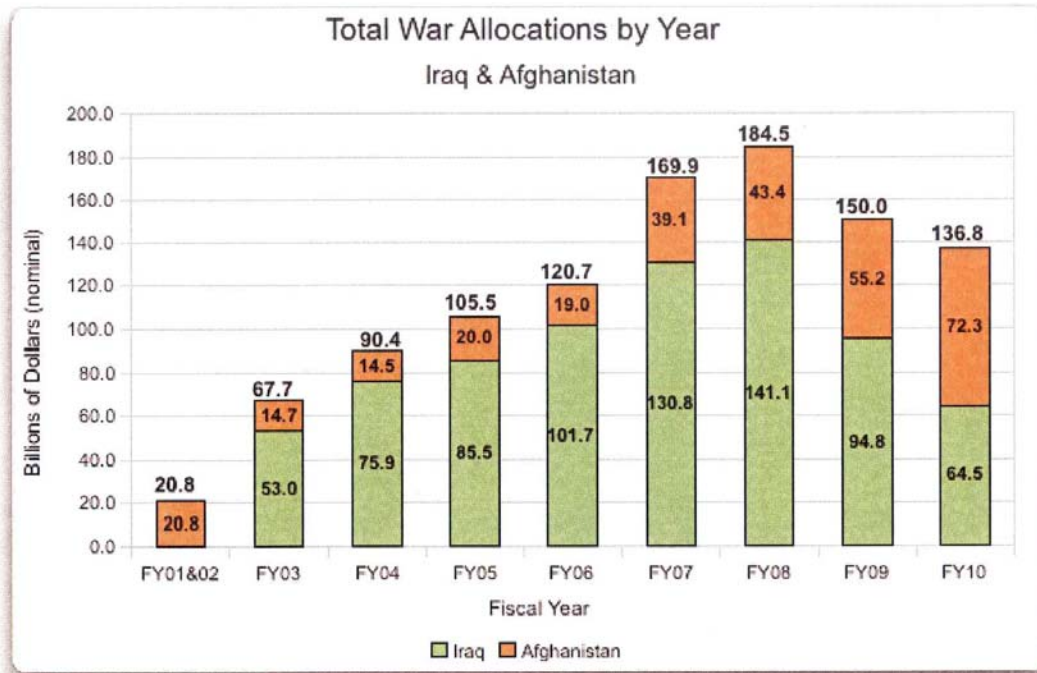
Source: 1949 *Form and Instruction 1001*, Federal Outlay by FY 2008



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That is, the accumulated and underfunded spending since the Korean War.

Now, the baseline of Pentagon spending has remained high and increased ever since Eisenhower’s warning that has gone largely unheeded. But there’s something else on top of this that this next chart shows: over \$1 trillion in additional costs for our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And you can see the costs growing each year for Afghanistan, as next year that war alone could approach \$100 billion.



When will our endless war economy end?

Look, from a Christian perspective I am not a pacifist (although I respect those who are). I acknowledge the occasional need to meet violence with violence. (I am not advocating that we reduce the military portion to zero.) But we have chosen this option too often and too easily. And we have made preparing for war such a priority that it is bankrupting this nation both literally and figuratively.

A few weeks ago, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said, “Our financial health is directly related to our national security,” implying that *runaway military spending actually undermines national security*. This was an amazing thing to come from the Chair of the Joint Chiefs. And even some conservatives such as Kori Schake of the Hoover Institution and Bush administration, wrote that “Defense has for too long lived immune from economics.”

This harkens back to Eisenhower, who warned of excessive military spending threatening this nation's security. He resisted calls from members of his own political party to outspend the Soviets. He said, "Spiritual force, multiplied by economic force, multiplied by military force is roughly equal to security." He referred to this as the "Great Equation," and said that "if one of these factors falls to zero, or near zero, the resulting product does likewise."

Look, there are many ways to measure the costs of war. There is the moral cost that is chronically underestimated, a cost that must be justified by the good to be accomplished. This includes the death of thousands U.S. soldiers, thousands of enemy combatants, and tens of thousands civilians, known abstractly as "collateral damage." This includes all those who are wounded, the lives that have been irreparably damaged, the destroyed lives of families on all sides. It includes the damage to our own souls when we engage in violence and hatred and fear. And the cost includes the perpetuation of the hatred and violence, the long term legacy of war, which no one seems to acknowledge. We are providing a breeding ground, it seems to me, for more enemies, pouring gasoline on a fire. Invading countries is not the method to deal with terrorism. Like cutting off the head of the hydra, only more heads will grow in its place.

And not only were there no terrorist links with Iraq when we invaded that country, the small number of terrorists has long left Afghanistan, and we now find ourselves fighting a new enemy, the Taliban.

And finally, we can measure the cost of these ineffective wars by the "theft" from the people and the well-being of this nation that Eisenhower warned us about.

You may agree with me or not—that's o.k.—but I believe that the costs of the Afghan war, like the Viet Nam and Iraq wars before it, are too great, and it should be ended.

You will recall that the preamble to the U.S. Constitution commits this nation to promoting the *general welfare*. That is, the budget should reflect a commitment to what the Bible calls the *common good*.

In his letter to the captives in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah told them not to fight, not to put their resources and energy into that, but to “build homes, plant gardens, and pray for the well-being of the land” and common good for all. Now you have to remember, they were enslaved. He wanted them to contribute and look out for the general welfare even for those who imprisoned them!

He stated, “seek the welfare of the city.” And that is a message to us all—to seek the welfare of the city, the state, and the nation. “For in its welfare,” said Jeremiah, “you will find *your* welfare.”

Spending in things like education, job training, health care, housing, food assistance, environmental protection—all these and many others promote the general welfare and common good. But they have been neglected (like the levees in New Orleans) largely because of excessive military spending, and our true security has been undermined.

The way I see it, we need less waging war and more waging peace.

For violence alone cannot solve our problem of terrorism give us security. Ultimately violence and war are negative forms of power that can be used against other greater negative forms. But ultimately the solution involves something positive, a positive force, such as diplomatic initiatives and true humanitarian aid. As Lincoln said, “The best way to destroy and enemy is to make him

a friend.” We need to be about the business of making friends and waging peace.

It was Martin Luther King Jr., that true American prophet, who said,

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.  
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.  
Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence...  
The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.*

I’m saying that our national budget that says so much about us needs to reflect more love and more light to strengthen the social fabric of our nation and build up our general welfare and true security. And we should seek our welfare in the welfare of the cities even of our enemies. As King also said,

*Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.*

And so if we have a deficiency, it is in waging peace—promoting the common good—both at home and in the world. Daniel Berrigan talked about our weak and partial efforts to wage peace:

*There is no peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as making of war—at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, as least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake.*

If anyone was aware of the limitations of violence and war, it was Jesus, the one we all profess to follow. And he warned, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

Even if we don’t actually use it.

Because the cost can be just too much.



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