

By David Swanson

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In case you hadn't noticed, our Afghan War, like some oil-slicked bird in the Gulf of Mexico, has been dragged under the waves. It's largely off front pages and out of the TV spotlight (despite the possible [linkage](#) of the Times Square failed car bombing to the Pakistani Taliban). As a result, most Americans undoubtedly have little idea just how large the American war effort there has grown. The president's [massive surge](#) -- not just of troops, but of [CIA agents](#), drones, contractors, [base building](#), and who knows what else -- is actually going (if you'll excuse the phrase) great guns.

As it turns out, however, not everyone is quite as enthusiastic about the surge as Washington. NATO allies have not provided the expected number of trainers for the Afghan police and military in the expected period of surge time. They're [dragging their feet](#) over a war that is far less popular and [more controversial](#) in Europe than here. Because the almost hopeless task of standing up a [vast, effective Afghan military](#) (which that impoverished country has no way of affording) and an incorruptible [police force](#) (an oxymoron when it comes to Afghanistan) is considered so crucial to Washington's war strategy, the Pentagon has stepped in. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [recently announced](#) a further micro-surge. It seems that 850 U.S. military trainers will be dispatched to Afghanistan, supposedly for only 90-120 days, as a "stopgap measure." This evidently doesn't qualify as an actual part of the surge plan -- or as much in the way of news. On the heels of another grim [Pentagon assessment](#) of the war effort, the Obama administration continues to escalate.

And consider this proposition: no one ever surged for free. Or how about, in *Field of Dreams* movie-style, this: If they surge, sooner or later we must pay.

During the 2008 election campaign and [after](#) , Barack Obama promised that he would turn off the well-paved war-funding road the Bush administration had driven down many times in which requests to Congress for more war-fighting money were made as “supplementals,” outside the annual Pentagon budget request. Once Obama decided to surge in a big way, however, it was a foregone conclusion that that vow would be broken. And, though (again) it’s gotten remarkably little attention, his administration is now asking for an extra

[\\$33 billion](#)

(plus a couple of billion dollars more for the State Department) to help cover soaring Afghan war costs. This is, of course, the proverbial road to Hell, as David Swanson, the author of

[*Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union*](#)

, who covers Washington and our wars like a blanket at his website

[War Is a Crime](#)

(formerly After Downing Street), makes all too painfully clear. By the way, to catch Timothy MacBain's TomCast audio interview with Swanson on the media, Congress, and the administration's latest request for escalation funding, click

[here](#)

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Afghan Escalation Funding

More War, Fewer Jobs, Poor Excuses

By [David Swanson](#)

Isn't it time to call what Congress will soon vote on by its right name: war escalation funding?

Early in 2009, President Barack Obama [escalated](#) the war in Afghanistan with 21,000 "combat" troops, 13,000 "support" troops, and at least 5,000 mercenaries, without any serious debate in Congress or the corporate media. The President sent the first 17,000 troops prior to developing any plan for Afghanistan, leaving the impression that escalation was, somehow, an end in itself. Certainly it didn't accomplish anything else, a conclusion evident in downbeat reports on the Afghan war situation issued this month by both the

[Government Accountability Office](#)

and the

[Pentagon](#)

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So it seemed like progress for our representative government when, last fall, the media began to engage in a debate over whether further escalation in Afghanistan made sense. Granted, this was largely a public debate between the commander-in-chief and his generals (who should probably have been punished with removal from office for [insubordinate behavior](#)), but members of Congress at least popped up in cameo roles.

In September, for instance, 57 members of Congress [sent](#) a letter to the president opposing an escalation of the war. In October, Congresswoman Barbara Lee introduced a bill to prohibit the funding of any further escalation. In December, various groups of Congress members sent [letters](#) to the president and to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi opposing an escalation and asking for a chance to vote on it. Even as Congress [voted overwhelmingly](#) for a massive war and military budget in December, some representatives did speak out against further escalation and the funding needed for it.

While all sides in this debate agreed that such escalation funding would need to be voted on sometime in the first half of 2010, everyone [knew](#) something else as well: that the President would go ahead and escalate in Afghanistan even without funding in place -- the money all being borrowed anyway -- and that, once many or all of the new troops were there, he would get less resistance from Congress which would be voting on something that had already happened.

The corporate media went along with this bait-and-switch strategy, polling and reporting on the escalation debate in Washington until the president fell in line behind his generals (give or take 10,000 or so extra troops). The coming vote was then relabeled as a simple matter of "war funding." This was convenient, since Americans are far more likely to oppose escalating already unpopular wars than just keeping them going -- and would be likely to oppose such funding even more strongly if the financial tradeoffs involved were made clear. However, a new poll [shows](#) a majority of Americans do not believe that this war is worth fighting at all.

Nonetheless, as in a tale foretold, Congress is expected to vote later this month on \$33 billion in further "war funding" to pay for sending 30,000 troops (plus "support" troops, etc.) to Afghanistan -- most of whom are already there or soon will be. In addition, an extra \$2 billion is being requested for aid and "civilian" operations in Afghanistan (much of which may actually go to the Afghan military and police), \$2.5 billion for the same in our almost forgotten war in Iraq,

and another \$2 billion for aid to (or is it a further military presence in?) Haiti.

This upcoming vote, of course, provides the opportunity that our representatives were asking for half a year ago. They can now vote the president's escalation up or down in the only way that could possibly be enforced, by voting its funding up or down. Blocking the funding in the House of Representatives would mean turning those troops around and bringing them back home -- and unlike the procedure for passing a bill, there would be no need for any action by the Senate or the president.

What Does \$33 Billion Look Like?

So, how much money are we talking about exactly? Well not enough, evidently, for the teabagging enemies of reckless government spending to take notice. Clearly not enough for the labor movement or any other advocates of spending on jobs or healthcare or education or green energy to disturb their slumbers. God forbid! Yet it's still a sizeable number by a certain reckoning.

After all, 33 billion miles could take you to the sun 226 times. And \$33 billion could radically alter any non-military program in existence. There's a bill in the Senate, for instance, that would prevent schools from laying off teachers in all 50 states for a mere \$23 billion. Another \$9.6 billion would quadruple the Department of Energy's budget for renewable energy. Now, what to do with that extra \$0.4 billion?

And remember what this \$33 billion actually involves: adding more troops, support troops, and private contractors, whose work, in turn, will mean ongoing higher costs to maintain the Afghan occupation, [construct new bases](#) there, fuel the machines of war, and provide the weaponry. Keep in mind as well that various other costs associated with the president's most recent "surge" are hidden in the budgets of the CIA, the Department of State, and other parts of the government. Looking just at the military, however, this is \$33 billion to be added to an unfathomable pile of waste. According to the Congressional Budget Office, Congress has already approved [\\$345 billion](#) for war in Afghanistan, not to mention \$708 billion in Iraq.

According to the National Priorities Project, for that same money we could have [renewable](#)

[energy](#)

in

1,083,271,391 homes for a year (or every home in the country for more than 10 years), or pay 17,188,969 elementary school teachers for a year. There may be 2.6 million elementary and middle school teachers in our country now. Assuming we could use 3 million teachers, we could hire them all for five years and employ that extra \$13 billion or so to give them bonuses. "Honor our brave teachers" anyone?

Even these calculations, however, are misleading. As economists Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz demonstrated in [The Three Trillion Dollar War](#), their book on the cost of the Iraq war alone, adding in debt payments on moneys borrowed to fight that war, long-term care for veterans wounded in it, the war's impact on energy prices, and other macroeconomic impacts, the current tax bill for the Iraq War must be at least tripled and probably quadrupled or more to arrive at its real long-term cost. (Similarly, the cost in lives must be multiplied by all those lives that could have been saved through other, better uses of the same funding.) The same obviously applies to the Afghan War.

The fact is that military spending is destroying the U.S. economy. An excellent report from the National Priorities Project, "[Security Spending Primer](#)," provides a summary of research that supports these basic and well-documented facts:

*Investing public dollars in the military produces fewer jobs than cutting taxes.

*Cutting taxes produces fewer jobs than investing public dollars in any of these areas: healthcare, education, mass transit, or construction for home weatherization and infrastructural repair.

*Investing public dollars in mass transit or education produces more than twice as many jobs as investing in the military.

*Investing public dollars in education produces better paying jobs than investing in the military or cutting taxes.

*Investing public dollars in any of these areas: healthcare, education, mass transit, construction for home weatherization and infrastructural repair has a larger direct and indirect economic impact than investing in the military or cutting taxes.

Too broad a view? Then consider just the present proposed \$33 billion escalation funding for the Afghan War. For that sum, we could have 20 green energy jobs paying \$50,000 per year here in the United States for every soldier sent to Afghanistan; a job, that is, for each of those former soldiers and 19 other Americans. We're spending on average [\\$400 per gallon](#) to transport gas over extended and difficult supply lines into Afghanistan where the U.S. military uses 27 million gallons a month. We're spending hundreds of millions of dollars to bribe various small nations to be part of a "coalition" there. We're spending at least that much to bribe Afghans to join our side, an effort that has so far

[recruited](#) only 646 Taliban guerrillas, many of whom seem to have taken the money and run back to the other side. Does all this sound like a wise investment -- or the kind of work Wall Street would do?

What Excuses Are They Using?

A [strong case](#) can be made that the war in Afghanistan is illegal, immoral, against the public will, counterproductive on its own terms, and an economic catastrophe. The present path of escalation there appears militarily hopeless. The most recent Pentagon assessment once again indicates that the Taliban's strength is [growing](#); according to polling, 94% of the inhabitants of Kandahar, the area where the next U.S. offensive is to take place this summer, [want](#) peace negotiations, not war, and a U.S. plan to seek local consent for the coming assault has been [scrapped](#).

Many members of Congress will still tell you that our goal in Afghanistan is to "win" or to "keep us safe" or to "get bin Laden." But those who opposed the escalation last year, and the 65 members of the House of Representatives who [voted](#) to end the war entirely on March 10th, seem to be [offering](#) remarkably insubstantial excuses for refusing to commit to a no-vote on the \$33 billion in escalation funding.

I recently asked Congressman Jerrold Nadler, for example, if he would vote no on that funding,

and he replied that he absolutely would -- unless the Democratic leadership put something so good into the bill that he wouldn't want to vote against it. In just this way, aid for Hurricane Katrina victims, the extension of unemployment insurance, and all sorts of other goodies have been added to war and escalation funding bills over the years.

Nadler claimed that the Haiti aid already in the bill wouldn't win his vote, but something else might. In other words, if there were any chance of the bill being in trouble, Nadler's vote could essentially be bought simply by adding some goody he likes. Never mind whether or not it outweighed \$33 billion worth of damage; never mind if the benefit, whatever it might be, could pass separately. The point is that Nadler is not really committed to ending the war or even blocking its escalation in the way he would be if he committed himself now to a no vote and lobbied his colleagues to join him. Instead, he's ready to pose as a war opponent only as long as his stance proves no threat to the war. And in this, he's typical.

Congressman Bill Delahunt gave me a [unique excuse](#) for not committing in advance to a no vote on the funding. He craved the attention, he said, that comes from not announcing how you will vote -- as if such attention matters more than the lives he might fund the taking of. Radio host Nicole Sandler took up my question and [asked](#)

Congressman Kendrick Meek what he was planning to do. He responded by claiming that he hadn't yet been briefed about the war and so couldn't decide.

Congressman Donald Payne gave me an [excuse](#) (now common among Democrats who evidently haven't read the Constitution in a while) guaranteed to lead to a yes vote: he must support his president and so plans to vote for what the President tells him to.

Some excuses can only be anticipated at this point. Many congress members will, for instance, undoubtedly settle for [voting for](#) a relatively meaningless non-binding exit-timetable amendment to the bill, or at least co-sponsor a bill identical to that amendment, and some will likely use that as reasonable cover for casting their votes to fund the escalation.

Antiwar advocates for peace and justice are [not taking](#) all of this lying down. Cities are passing resolutions opposing any more war funding. People are holding vigils and sit-ins at local congressional offices -- more than 100 of which are planned for

[May 19th](#)

. Congressional phones are ringing, newspaper editors are receiving letters, and an online

[whip list](#)

-- a list of where every House member stands -- is being constantly updated. In the end, though, the fundamental question is how many people will outgrow their partisan loyalties, of either variety, and tell their representative that they will vote for someone else if he or she votes for more war.

An extreme step? Well, what do you call wasting \$33 billion on a hopeless, immoral, illegal war that a majority of Americans oppose, and denying those same dollars to job creation or any other decent purpose?