

# We Have the Money: If Only We Didn't Waste It on the Defense Budget

By [Chalmers Johnson](#)

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There has been much moaning, air-sucking, and outrage about the \$700 billion that the U.S. government is thinking of throwing away on rich New York bankers who have been ripping us off for the past few years and then letting greed drive their businesses into a variety of ditches. In fact, we dole out similar amounts of money every year in the form of payoffs to the armed services, the military-industrial complex, and powerful senators and representatives allied with the Pentagon.

On Wednesday, September 24th, right in the middle of the fight over billions of taxpayer dollars slated to bail out Wall Street, the House of Representatives passed a \$612 billion defense authorization bill for 2009 without a murmur of public protest or any meaningful press comment at all. (The *New York Times* gave the matter [only three short paragraphs](#) buried in a story about another appropriations measure.)

The defense bill includes \$68.6 billion to pursue the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is only a down-payment on the full yearly cost of these wars. (The rest will be raised through future supplementary bills.) It also included a 3.9% pay raise for military personnel, and \$5 billion in pork-barrel projects not even requested by the administration or the secretary of defense. It also fully funds the Pentagon's request for a radar site in the Czech Republic, a hare-brained scheme sure to infuriate the Russians just as much as a Russian missile base in Cuba once infuriated us. The whole bill passed by a vote of 392-39 and will fly through the Senate, where a similar bill has already been approved. And no one will even think to mention it in the same breath with the discussion of bailout funds for dying investment banks and the like.

This is pure waste. Our annual spending on "national security" — meaning the defense budget plus all military expenditures hidden in the budgets for the departments of Energy, State, Treasury, Veterans Affairs, the CIA, and numerous other places in the executive branch — already exceeds a trillion dollars, an amount [larger than that](#) of all other national defense budgets combined. Not only was there no significant media coverage of this latest appropriation, there have been no signs of even the slightest urge to inquire into the relationship between our bloated military, our staggering weapons expenditures, our extravagantly expensive failed wars abroad, and the financial catastrophe on Wall Street.

The only Congressional "commentary" on the size of our military outlay was the usual pompous drivel about how a failure to vote for the defense authorization bill would betray our troops. The aged Senator John Warner (R-Va), former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, [implored](#) his Republican colleagues to vote for the bill "out of respect for military personnel." He seems to be unaware that these troops are actually volunteers,

not draftees, and that they joined the armed forces as a matter of career choice, rather than because the nation demanded such a sacrifice from them.

We would better respect our armed forces by bringing the futile and misbegotten wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to an end. A relative degree of peace and order has returned to Iraq not because of President Bush's belated reinforcement of our expeditionary army there (the so-called surge), but thanks to shifting internal dynamics within Iraq and in the Middle East region generally. Such shifts include a growing awareness among Iraq's Sunni population of the need to restore law and order, a growing confidence among Iraqi Shiites of their nearly unassailable position of political influence in the country, and a growing awareness among Sunni nations that the ill-informed war of aggression the Bush administration waged against Iraq has vastly increased the influence of Shiism and Iran in the region.

The continued presence of American troops and their heavily reinforced bases in Iraq threaten this return to relative stability. The refusal of the Shia government of Iraq to agree to an American Status of Forces Agreement — much desired by the Bush administration — that would exempt off-duty American troops from Iraqi law is actually a good sign for the future of Iraq.

In Afghanistan, our historically deaf generals and civilian strategists do not seem to understand that our defeat by the Afghan insurgents is inevitable. Since the time of Alexander the Great, no foreign intruder has ever prevailed over Afghan guerrillas defending their home turf. The first Anglo-Afghan War (1838-1842) marked a particularly humiliating defeat of British imperialism at the very height of English military power in the Victorian era. The Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) resulted in a Russian defeat so demoralizing that it contributed significantly to the disintegration of the former Soviet Union in 1991. We are now on track to repeat virtually all the errors committed by previous invaders of Afghanistan over the centuries.

In the past year, perhaps most disastrously, we have carried our Afghan war into [Pakistan](#), a relatively wealthy and sophisticated nuclear power that has long cooperated with us militarily. Our recent bungling brutality along the Afghan-Pakistan border threatens to radicalize the Pashtuns in both countries and advance the interests of radical Islam throughout the region. The United States is now identified in each country mainly with Hellfire missiles, unmanned drones, special operations raids, and repeated incidents of the killing of innocent bystanders.

The brutal bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, on September 20, 2008, was a powerful indicator of the spreading strength of virulent anti-American sentiment in the area. The hotel was a well-known watering hole for American Marines, Special Forces troops, and CIA agents. Our military activities in Pakistan have been as misguided as the Nixon-Kissinger invasion of Cambodia in 1970. The end result will almost surely be the same.

We should begin our disengagement from Afghanistan at once. We dislike the Taliban's fundamentalist religious values, but the Afghan public, with its desperate desire for a return of law and order and the curbing of corruption, knows that the Taliban is the only political force in the country that has ever brought the opium trade under control. The Pakistanis and their effective army can defend their country from Taliban domination so long as we abandon the activities that are causing both Afghans and Pakistanis to see the Taliban as a

lesser evil.

One of America's greatest authorities on the defense budget, Winslow Wheeler, worked for 31 years for Republican members of the Senate and for the General Accounting Office on military expenditures. His [conclusion](#), when it comes to the fiscal sanity of our military spending, is devastating:

"America's defense budget is now larger in inflation-adjusted dollars than at any point since the end of World War II, and yet our Army has fewer combat brigades than at any point in that period; our Navy has fewer combat ships; and the Air Force has fewer combat aircraft. Our major equipment inventories for these major forces are older on average than any point since 1946 — or in some cases, in our entire history."

This in itself is a national disgrace. Spending hundreds of billions of dollars on present and future wars that have nothing to do with our national security is simply obscene. And yet Congress has been corrupted by the military-industrial complex into believing that, by voting for more defense spending, they are supplying "jobs" for the economy. In fact, they are only diverting scarce resources from the desperately needed rebuilding of the American infrastructure and other crucial spending necessities into utterly wasteful munitions. If we cannot cut back our longstanding, ever increasing military spending in a major way, then the bankruptcy of the United States is inevitable. As the current Wall Street meltdown has demonstrated, that is no longer an abstract possibility but a growing likelihood. We do not have much time left.

*Chalmers Johnson is the author of three linked books on the crises of American imperialism and militarism. They are [Blowback](#) (2000), [The Sorrows of Empire](#) (2004), and [Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic](#) (2006). All are available in paperback from Metropolitan Books.*

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