

Published: May 01, 2007 12:00 AM

Modified: May 01, 2007 05:04 AM

War's cost nears \$500B

For some, fighting in Iraq is worth any price tag. But opponents say it's too much

RON HUTCHESON, McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON - The bitter fight over the latest Iraq spending bill has all but obscured a sobering fact: The war will soon cost more than \$500 billion.

That's about ten times more than the Bush administration anticipated before the war started four years ago, and no one can predict how high the tab will go. The \$124 billion spending bill that President Bush plans to veto this week includes about \$78 billion for Iraq, with the rest earmarked for the war in Afghanistan, veterans' health care and other government programs.

Congressional Democrats and Bush agree that they cannot let their dispute over a withdrawal timetable block the latest cash installment for Iraq. Once that political fight is resolved, Congress can focus on the president's request for \$116 billion more for the war in the fiscal year that starts on Sept. 1.

The combined spending requests would push the total for Iraq to \$564 billion, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

What could that kind of money buy?

A college education -- tuition, fees, room and board at a public university -- for about half of the nation's 17 million high-school-age teenagers.

Preschool for every 3- and 4-year-old in the country for the next eight years.

A year's stay in an assisted-living facility for about half of the 35 million Americans age 65 or older.

By comparison, the U.S. deficit is around \$9 trillion.

Not surprisingly, opinions about the cost of the war track opinions about the war itself.

"If it's really vital, then whatever it costs, we should pay it. If it isn't, whatever we pay is too much," said Robert Hormats, author of "The Price of Liberty," a newly published book that examines the financing of U.S. wars.

Before the war, administration officials predicted that the conflict would cost about \$50 billion. White House economic adviser Lawrence Lindsey lost his job after he offered a \$200 billion estimate -- a prediction that drew scorn from his administration colleagues.

"They had no concept of what they were getting into in terms of lives or cost," said Winslow Wheeler, who monitors defense spending for the Center for Defense Information, a nonpartisan research institute.

Is it worth it?

Bush and his economic advisers defend the growing cost as the price of national security.

"It's worth it," Bush said last May, when the tab was about \$320 billion. "I wouldn't have spent it if

it wasn't worth it."

For war opponents, the escalating cost is a growing source of irritation.

"It comes down to the question, how do you want to spend a half trillion dollars? Do you want to spend a half trillion dollars on this or would you rather spend it on something else?" said economist Anita Danes, the organization's research director. "It's all a matter of costs and benefits."

Painless approach

As wars go, Iraq is cheap. World War II cost more than \$5 trillion in today's dollars. World War I and Vietnam each cost about \$650 billion in today's dollars, but spending on those wars took a much bigger share of the economy when they were fought.

"For the average American, there's really been no economic consequence of the country being involved in a war," said Hormats, vice chairman of Goldman Sachs [International]. "It doesn't have as much impact on the economy as those previous wars did."

But the painless approach to financing the Iraq war could cause problems in the future. Hormats worries that the decision to cut taxes and increase domestic spending while fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will complicate efforts to deal with the financial strains that threaten to bankrupt Social Security and Medicare.

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THE COST OF WAR

A look at the cost to U.S. taxpayers for wars, adjusted to 2007 dollars.

\$1.1 billion- War of 1812

\$2 billion- Mexican War

\$3.6 billion- Revolutionary War

\$80.4 billion- Civil War

\$91.5 billion- Persian Gulf War

\$455.4 billion- Korean War

\$651.8 billion- Vietnam War

\$656.2 billion- World War I

\$5.4 trillion- World War II

THE LATEST IN IRAQ

* A suicide bomber struck a crowd of funeral mourners Monday north of Baghdad, taking more than 30 lives. Bombings and shootings nationwide Monday killed at least 102 people. Thunderous explosions rocked central Baghdad -- apparently from rockets fired toward the U.S.-controlled Green Zone. Warning sirens sounded in the heavily protected district, and witnesses saw smoke rising from the area. The U.S. military said it had no immediate information about damage or casualties.

* The largest bloc of Sunni Arabs in the Iraqi parliament threatened to withdraw its ministers from the Shiite-dominated cabinet Tuesday in frustration over the Iraq government's failure to deal with Sunni concerns.

President Bush stepped in to forestall the move, calling one of Iraq's two vice presidents, Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni Arab, and inviting him to Washington, according to al-Hashimi's office and the White House.

* The head of the British army said Monday that he had decided that Prince Harry, the third in line to the throne, will serve with a combat unit in Iraq. Harry's regiment, the Blues and Royals, is due to begin a six-month tour of duty in Iraq within weeks.

* Military prosecutors began laying the groundwork Monday for the case against an Army commander accused of aiding the enemy, suggesting he was a pornography collector who let a "high-value" detainee use his cell phone and carried on inappropriate relationships with the man's daughter.

The line of questioning pursued on the first day of an Article 32 hearing, which will determine whether Lt. Col. William H. Steele should be court-martialed, appeared aimed at showing he abused his position as commander of the 451st Military Police Detachment at Camp Cropper in Baghdad, and later with the 89th Military Police Brigade in Baghdad.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS AND THE NEW YORK TIMES

WATCH THE COST GROW

A Web site showing a running tally of the war's cost, <http://costofwar.com/index.html>, attracts about 250,000 visitors a month, according to the National Priorities Project, the site's sponsor.

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