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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Now and ForeverBy **BOB HERBERT**

Most of the time we pretend it's not there: The staggering financial cost of the war in Iraq, which continues to soar, unchecked, like a rocket headed toward the moon and beyond.

Early last year, the Nobel-Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz estimated that the "true" cost of the war would ultimately exceed \$1 trillion, and maybe even \$2 trillion.

Incredibly, that estimate may have been low.

A report prepared for the Democratic majority on the Joint Economic Committee of the House and Senate warns that without a significant change of course in Iraq, the long-term cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could head into the vicinity of \$3.5 trillion. The vast majority of those expenses would be for Iraq.

Priorities don't get much more twisted. A country that can't find the money to provide health coverage for its children, or to rebuild the city of New Orleans, or to create a first-class public school system, is flushing whole generations worth of cash into the bottomless pit of a failed and endless war.

"The No. 1 reason that the war in Iraq should end," said Senator Charles Schumer, chairman of the joint committee, "is the loss of life that is occurring without accomplishing any of the goals that even President Bush put forward."

But "right below that," he said, is the need to stop squandering incredible amounts of money that could be put to better use — helping to "make people's lives better" — here at home. That colossal and continuing waste, he said, "should cause anxiety in anyone who cares about the future of this country. I know it causes me anxiety."

President Bush's formal funding requests for Iraq have already exceeded \$600 billion. In addition to that, the report offers estimates of the war's "hidden costs" from its beginning to 2017: the long-term costs of treating the wounded and disabled; interest and other costs associated with borrowing to finance the war; the money needed to repair or replace military equipment; the increased costs of military recruitment and retention; and such difficult to gauge but very real costs as the loss of productivity from those who have been killed or wounded.

What matters more than the precision of these estimates (Republicans are not happy with them) is the undeniable fact that the costs associated with the Iraq war are huge and carry with them enormous societal consequences.

Far from seeking a halt to the war, the Bush administration has been considering a significant U.S. military presence in Iraq that would last for many years, if not decades. There has been very little public discussion and no thorough analysis of the overall implications of such a policy.

What is indisputable, however, is that everything associated with the Iraq war has cost vastly more than the administration's absurdly sunny forecasts. The direct appropriations are already roughly 10 times the amount of the administration's original estimates of the entire cost of the war.

Senator Schumer and other Democrats on the Joint Economic Committee have been trying (not very successfully, so far) to get other policy makers and the public at large to focus on the sheer insanity of pumping hundreds of billions — if not trillions — of public dollars into a failed venture with no end even remotely in view.

There are myriad better ways to use the many millions of dollars that the U.S. spends on Iraq every day. Two important long-term investments that come to mind — and that would put large numbers of Americans to work — are the development of a serious strategy for achieving energy independence over the next several years and the creation of a large-scale program for rebuilding the aging American infrastructure.

To get to those, or any number of other important initiatives, the country's leaders will have to somehow get past their bizarre reluctance to end this debilitating war.

I asked Senator Schumer how soon he thought U.S. forces should leave Iraq. He said: "You start withdrawing in three months and be out in a year. In my view, there would be a small force left — 10,000 or 15,000 — to deal with any Al Qaeda camps that might be set up. But that's it."

His words were echoed in another context by Senator Jim Webb, a Virginia Democrat (and also a member of the Joint Economic Committee), who said on "Meet the Press" on Sunday that "it's not in the strategic interest of the United States" to have a long-term military presence in Iraq.

Youngsters who were just starting high school when the U.S. invaded Iraq are in college now. Their children, yet unborn, will be called on to fork over tax money to continue paying for the war.

Seriously. How long do we want this madness to last?

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