

MAYBE WE FOUGHT THE WAR WRONG?

National Journal has a fascinating article comparing the cost-benefit of the war against al Qaeda with that of other wars. It puts the cost of the war at \$3 trillion—less than just the defense costs of World War II. But it didn't bring the same kind of return.

By conservative estimates, bin Laden cost the United States at least \$3 trillion over the past 15 years, counting the disruptions he wrought on the domestic economy, the wars and heightened security triggered by the terrorist attacks he engineered, and the direct efforts to hunt him down. What do we have to show for that tab? Two wars that continue to occupy 150,000 troops and tie up a quarter of our defense budget; a bloated homeland-security apparatus that has at times pushed the bounds of civil liberty; soaring oil prices partially attributable to the global war on bin Laden's terrorist network; and a chunk of our mounting national debt, which threatens to hobble the economy unless lawmakers compromise on an unprecedented deficit-reduction deal.

All of that has not given us, at least not yet, anything close to the social or economic advancements produced by the battles against America's costliest past enemies.

Just as one example, here's how it contrasts WWII's cost-benefit calculus.

World War II defense spending cost \$4.4 trillion. At its peak, it sucked up nearly 40 percent of GDP, according to the Congressional Research Service. It was an unprecedented national

mobilization, says Chris Hellman, a defense budget analyst at the National Priorities Project. One in 10 Americans—some 12 million people—donned a uniform during the war.

But the payoff was immense. The war machine that revved up to defeat Germany and Japan powered the U.S. out of the Great Depression and into an unparalleled stretch of postwar growth. Jet engines and nuclear power spread into everyday lives. A new global economic order—forged at Bretton Woods, N.H., by the Allies in the waning days of the war—opened a floodgate of benefits through international trade. Returning soldiers dramatically improved the nation's skills and education level, thanks to the GI Bill, and they produced a baby boom that would vastly expand the workforce.

It's a perhaps cold way to discuss war, but a fascinating one. (Note, here's another cost-benefit analysis, one which shows we invest far too much in security theater given the extent of the threat we face.)

Given such analysis, can we perhaps consider the question of whether we fought this war wrong? Just as an example, I perhaps too glibly considered the plight of al Qaeda, which is reportedly now considering derailing trains for an anniversary attack. I was glib primarily because, given our aging rail stock, derailments are a fairly common occurrence even without a terrorist's involvement. Similarly, I noted the silliness of a big domestic spying effort to find potential threats to pipelines when utilities themselves seem to be ensuring pipelines blow-up.

What if, instead of dumping billions into domestic surveillance, we instead spent some of that on training, but much of that on making our infrastructure much more resilient—resilient to

terrorist attacks, but also common decay? What if, rather than encouraging consumers to go deeper in debt to make sure the economy looked good on paper, we had invested to make it more resilient while making the country more self-reliant?

It seems that responding to terrorism in that manner would have had the kind of benefits our other wars had—and would have better prepared us for other tremendous threats, like climate change.