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## Mayors to Obama: Bring War Dollars Home

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The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will cost the residents of Los Angeles over \$1.8 billion this year. That's the amount of tax dollars that Los Angeles has sent to the federal government and will be spent on these two wars, according to calculations by the [National Priorities Project](#), a nonprofit research group. New Yorkers will shell out \$5.7 billion to pay for U.S. troops, weapons, and supplies in these two countries. The cost to Atlanta taxpayers is over \$203 million; Philadelphians will pay \$612 million; in Milwaukee, the price tag is \$221 million. The taxpayers of Boise, Idaho -- a city with 205, 707 people -- will spend \$75 million in these two war zones this year.

This week, the nation's mayors, desperate for dollars to keep their cities afloat, demanded: we want our money back! At its annual conference in Baltimore, the U.S. Conference of Mayors passed a [resolution](#) calling for an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, saying that the money could be put to better use at home. The resolution calls on the president and Congress to "bring these war dollars home to meet vital human needs, promote job creation, rebuild our infrastructure, aid municipal and state governments, and develop a new economy based upon renewable, sustainable energy and reduce the federal debt."

The resolution was initiated by the mayors of liberal cities -- including Carolyn Peterson of Ithaca, David Cross of Santa Fe, R.T. Rybak of Minneapolis; and Dave Norris of Charlottesville -- but it soon had widespread support from mayors from all over.

Los Angeles has an annual budget of almost \$7 billion. That sounds like a lot, but it is not enough to provide even basic services for the city's four million residents, businesses, and commuters. In recent years, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a progressive Democrat, has faced a sea of red ink from declining business revenues, property taxes, and federal and state cuts, forcing him to eliminate thousands of jobs, impose citywide furloughs, and slash library hours, pothole repairs, garbage collection, and other services. Earlier this month, facing a \$336 million revenue shortfall, he closed down some fire engine teams, eliminated police overtime pay, sliced homeless programs, and reduced the parks and recreation budget.

"It's time to bring our investments back home," [said Villaraigosa](#), the newly-elected president of the mayors conference. "We can't be building roads and bridges in Baghdad and Kandahar, and not in Baltimore and Kansas City."

The urban fiscal crisis is so desperate that even Mick Cornett, the Republican mayor of Oklahoma City, echoed these sentiments, telling CNN: "Those infrastructure dollars that have been spent rebuilding cities in eastern Afghanistan should be redirected to cities in the United States that have aging infrastructure."

The Conference of Mayors released a [report](#) noting that about \$126 billion is being spent annually on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while 75 metropolitan areas are expected to have double-digit unemployment by the end of the year.

The mayors' resolution was not as strong as the one it passed 40 years ago, calling on President Richard Nixon to withdraw all U.S. troops from Vietnam within six months.

Most big-city mayors are Democrats, whose constituents include many low-income residents and whose cities have been particularly hurt by the dramatic cuts of federal housing, infrastructure, and other programs since the 1980s. In 1978, federal aid to cities peaked at 15% of cities' revenues. Today, Washington contributes only about 4% of municipal budgets.

Some mayors wondered why the resolution only sought "speeding up the ending" of the wars and not immediate withdrawal. But at their Baltimore meeting, the mayors were careful not to come down too hard on president Barack Obama, who has disappointed many liberals and progressives by maintaining high troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, the resolution passed only after it was amended to give the Obama administration some wiggle room. The amended version reads that "the draw-down of troops should be done in a measured way that does not destabilize the region."

Mayor Michael A. Nutter of Philadelphia, the conference's new vice president, said: "We don't consider this to be a quote-unquote war resolution. We actually consider it to be an economic policy resolution."

Nutter told NPR: "We have to at least recognize in this big, great country that we have to be able to do more than one thing at a time. We should not allow ourselves to get caught in a slightly false debate that we're either going to support military activities, or we're going to support cities. We can actually do both in the United States of America."

But the reality is that the nation *does* have to choose between "guns" and "butter." There are, as economists argue, trade-offs when deciding where and how to allocate scarce federal dollars. On its website, the National Priorities Project reveals the [trade-offs](#) for every city, state, and Congressional district, as well as the entire nation.

For example, the \$1.8 billion that Los Angeles is sending to Iraq and Afghanistan this year could otherwise pay for 16,913 elementary school teachers, or 17,099 firefighters, or 148,237 Head Start slots for children, or 449,316 low-income people getting health care, or 155,886 scholarships for university students, or 462,138 households installing solar photovoltaic cells to save energy, or 137,282 military veterans receiving health care from the Veterans Administration.

The "guns vs. butter" debate is a longstanding one. In the 1940s, Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers union, championed a plan to convert the nation's defense factories toward civilian use after World War 2. Instead, business and political leaders put the country on what some called a "permanent war economy" footing, justified by the Cold War and the arms race with the Soviet Union. As a result, the military -- including weapons systems, military bases in the U.S. and overseas, and millions of American civilians and uniformed troops employed by the Pentagon -- gobbled up a largest portion of the federal budget, squeezing out other priorities.

In his farewell address on January 17, 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower, a war hero, warned about the "unwarranted influence" of the "military industrial complex." Later in the decade, President Lyndon Johnson discovered that he could not wage an effective war on poverty and a war in Vietnam at the same time. As a result, he lost both, and lost his job.

In 1967, Rev. Martin Luther King, who was a strong supporter of LBJ's Great Society agenda, broke his silence on opposing the Vietnam war when the contradictions became too serious to ignore any longer. In a speech in Los Angeles, King [said](#):

While the anti-poverty program is cautiously initiated, zealously supervised and evaluated for immediate results, billions are liberally expended for this ill-considered war. The recently revealed mis-estimate of the war budget amounts to ten billions of dollars for a single year. This error alone is more than five times the amount committed to anti-poverty programs. The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities. The bombs in Vietnam explode at home: they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.

When the Cold War with the Soviet Union ended in the late 1980s, Americans were promised a "peace dividend." Many military experts at the time suggested that the defense budget could be cut by one-third to one-half without undermining national security.

And what about the jobs of Americans employed by defense contractors or living in areas whose local economies depended on military bases? Like Walter Reuther had proposed in the 1940s, experts like Seymour Melman, a Columbia University professor, put forward detailed "defense conversion" plans showing how factories could be retooled and workers retrained to guarantee that they would not be harmed by the transition from a war economy to a civilian peace economy.

But the dramatic "peace dividend" never arrived. Presidents Bush, Clinton, and Bush as well as Congress refused to challenge the military industrial complex. Indeed, President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney used the "war on terror" as an excuse to increase the military budget, expand new weapons system, funnel more federal contracts to big defense contractors like Halliburton, Boeing, and Lockheed Martin, and, in the process, cut taxes for the rich and swell the federal budget deficit.

Now the mayors of America's cities and towns -- hardly radicals -- are desperately seeking federal funds to stop the hemorrhaging of jobs and services, and to maintain the nation's aging infrastructure.

Mayor Joseph O'Brien of Worcester, Massachusetts, observed: "We are spending a billion a month after Osama bin Laden has been killed. And while I appreciate the effort to rebuild nations around the world, we have tremendous needs in communities like mine."

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