
We Lost 10 Years to the "War on Terror," It's Time We Admit It



By Brian Frydenborg October 11, 2013

13 upvotes

When you look at the entirety of events over the last twelve years — 9/11, the wars, our degenerating politics, broken government, and economic catastrophes — the picture is bleak.

We've watched our country sputter and fail at home and abroad, and the truth is undeniable: We haven't learned from, admitted, or understood our mistakes, and we aren't on a better track now than we were on September 10, 2001. That's the opposite of progress.



For Al-Qaeda, 9/11 was about much, much more than just killing Americans. The single finest article I've ever read (and I've read many) about the so-called "War on Terror" was Mark Danner's "[Taking Stock of the Forever War](#)" from the *New York Times Magazine*, published on the fourth anniversary of the attacks.

Using Osama bin Laden's and Al-Qaeda's own words, the article makes several things very clear.

Firstly, Al-Qaeda's aims were all about sweeping away non-Islamist governments ruling over Muslims — mainly secular dictators and monarchs — in order to create, then spread, a global caliphate based on its [sick](#), extreme [version](#) of Islam.

These regimes were dubbed the "near enemy," the U.S. and the West, propping them up, the "far enemy." Unable to topple the "near enemies," bin Laden's plan was to target those enabling "far enemies" (specifically America) and thus draw us into a long, drawn out war in a Muslim country. Local resistance could be incited against U.S. forces, the conflict would spread, and, copy cat, mostly independent Al-Qaeda-like franchises (like [al-Shabab](#) and Al-Qaeda's [affiliate in Iraq and Syria](#), examples of [al-Qaeda "2.0"](#)) would sprout up and grow.

In this long struggle, America would expend so many resources that, like the [Soviet Union after its failed invasion of Afghanistan](#), its economic system and the worldwide economic system it supported would collapse. Into the void would emerge Al-Qaeda's [Caliphate](#).



I remember reading that article and crushingly realizing that bin Laden had played us like a harp, that we were so stupid, so incompetent, so blind that we did *exactly what he wanted us to do*. Apart from the Caliphate, all his other goals are being advanced. It still makes me sick to my stomach that the United States of America could fall for the trap of a man as monstrous as bin Laden and end up doing so much more harm than good, as [happened](#) all [too](#) often [during](#) the [Cold War](#), despite our best intentions.

My opinion of my country sunk at that moment. To my outrage, shame, and disgust, it has never recovered.



So here we are, today. Reasonable people can disagree as to when the [windows](#) for [success](#) in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) closed, but at a certain point [they did](#), and we [decided](#) to [withdraw](#). Our effort to remake Iraq into a peaceful, pluralistic democracy, friendly to the U.S. and its interests, failed, Iraq itself now a [failed state](#) (the [11th most failed](#)).

Same goes for Afghanistan, the [7th most failed](#) state, which could very well fall again to the Taliban again once we leave. How is it that the U.S. — a country that was able to help remake [Germany](#) and [Japan](#) into wonderfully [prosperous](#), [peaceful](#), and [free societies](#) over half a century earlier — failed so miserably?

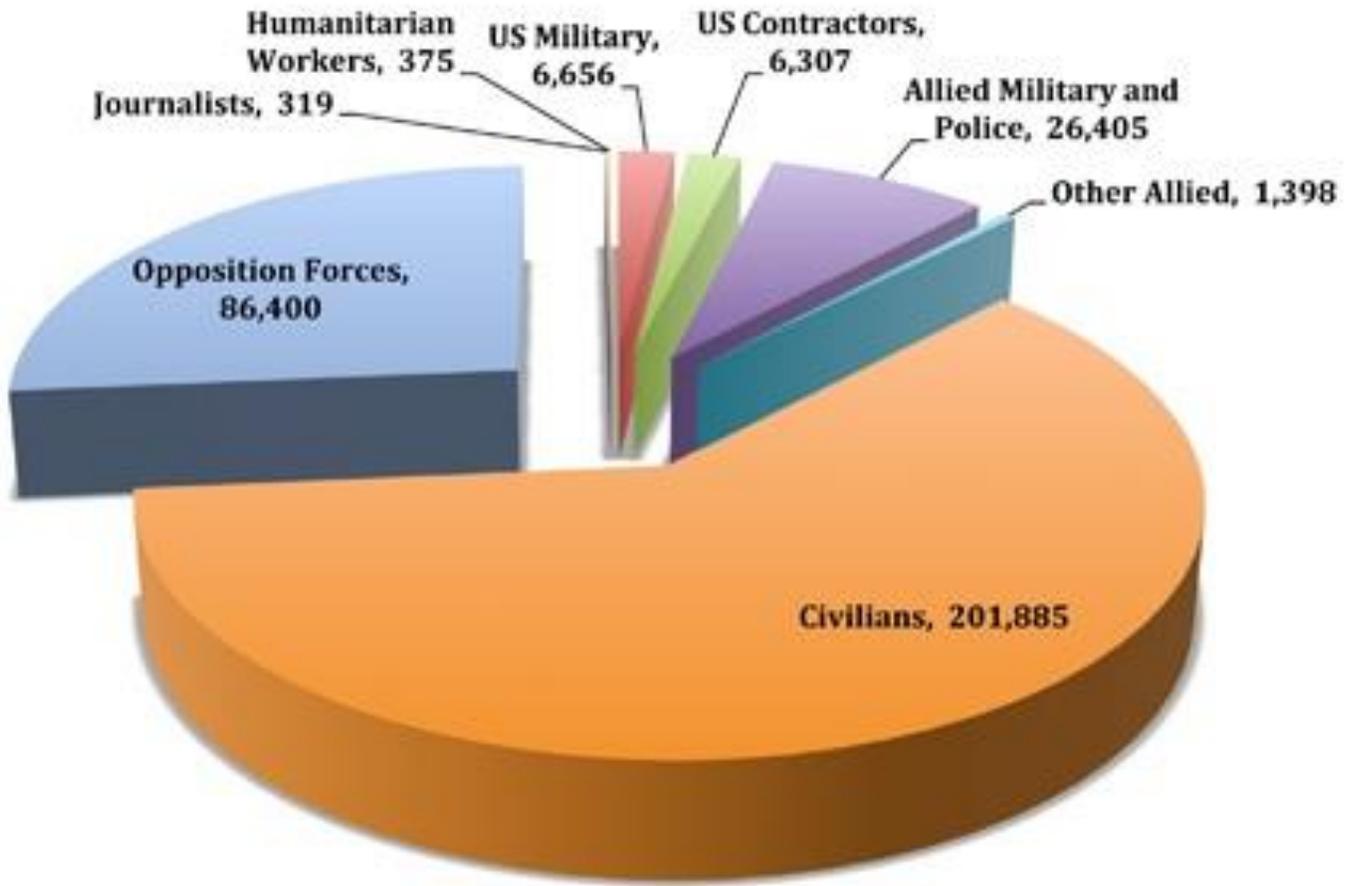
ESTIMATED DOLLAR COSTS OF WARS, in \$BILLIONS

THESE U.S. TOTALS DO NOT INCLUDE:
Medicare costs for injured veterans after age 65; Expenses for veterans paid for by state and local government budgets or the social cost of veterans care; Additional macroeconomic consequences of war spending including infrastructure and jobs. On macroeconomic consequences, see: Edwards, Heintz, and Garrett-Peltier.

	\$BILLIONS	REPORT / SOURCE
Congressional War Appropriations to Pentagon ¹	\$1,406.9	Wheeler and Crawford
War-related Additions to the Pentagon Base Budget	743.1	Crawford
War-related International Assistance (State Department/USAID) ³	103.5	Dancs and Crawford
Veteran's Medical and Disability	134.7	Bilmes
Additions to Homeland Security Spending	455.2	Dancs and Crawford
Cumulative Interest Payments on Pentagon War and State/USAID Appropriations through FY2013 by 2013	259.4	Edwards
SUBTOTAL FEDERAL OUTLAYS FY2001-FY2013	3,102.85	
Projected Iraq, Afghanistan and ONE spending, FY 2014 ⁴	65	Crawford
Projected Increase in Pentagon Base, FY2014	65	Crawford
Future Obligations for Veterans Medical and Disability through 2053 ⁵	754.4	Bilmes
SUBTOTAL FUTURE SPENDING AND OBLIGATIONS	884.4	
TOTAL COSTS OF WARS FROM FY2001 INCLUDING FUTURE SPENDING AND OBLIGATIONS	3,987.25	
Additional Cumulative Interest on Past Pentagon and State/USAID War Appropriations FY2001-2013 by 2053 ⁶	>7,000	Edwards

One thing we do know is that these wars will economically cost anywhere from around \$4-\$6 trillion according to [several detailed academic studies](#). These wars were black holes sucking resources and attention away from pressing issues, which the [opportunity cost of neglecting](#) can be very difficult to measure for a country still recovering from the [global financial crisis](#) and the [Great Recession](#). The [cost in lives](#) (so far) is in the hundreds of thousands, [perhaps even over a million](#), hundreds of thousands of wounded, and millions of displaced.

For what? I find it difficult to argue that they did not die in vain.



**330,000 Direct War Deaths, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan,
2001-February 2013***

*** Does not include indirect deaths which may total many hundreds of thousands more**

At home, America is [more divided](#) than at [any time since the Civil War](#), its [government](#) only [partly functional](#) and for decades unable to [tackle](#) its [long-term problems](#). Our system is [less open](#), our society [less free](#), even if more vigilant.

Shares of the Change in Debt Projections between 2001 and 2011

Specific Policies and Drivers



Source: Pew analysis of Congressional Budget Office (2001 – 2011) data.

Notes: Component share of the difference between the January 2001 CBO projection of publicly-held federal debt and actual debt, fiscal year 2011, as a percent of total debt. For all other notes, see Appendix Table 1.

Another great unspoken truth is that 9/11 was an [opportunity](#), like the Great Depression and WWII, to have a [transformative moment](#) for the better. When that moment came, Bush [told us to go shopping](#) and then

squandered our resources and energy for most of a decade in ways which paid few, if any, dividends. We did not rise, we did not triumph, we did not grasp the importance of that moment. We missed that once-in-a-generation opportunity.

I would say let's not forget that, but most of us aren't even aware of it.



We must recognize that the decade after 9/11 will **forever be a lost one**, and hope we never have another like it. Another one soon, and the **very survival of our system** and our way of life will be at risk.

