

Opinion: Costly wars should lead deficit-cutting panel's list

By Joel Brinkley

As the congressional debt-reduction "super committee" begins work this month, it had better take into account trillions of dollars in anticipated war costs that no one in Washington seems willing to acknowledge.

For decades now (and probably much longer), government estimates of war costs strove not to count numerous secondary expenses that result from combat, like veterans' health care – or the \$20 billion wasted in Pakistan. Officials find the real numbers embarrassing. A recent Congressional Budget Office report, for example, placed the total costs of the Iraq and Afghan wars at \$1.415 trillion, based solely on congressional appropriations specifically dedicated to those wars.

But a new academic study counts everything and puts the wars' full price at about \$4 trillion – almost all of it deficit spending. That's nearly 30 percent of the nation's \$14 trillion debt. Even that, the study's authors say, doesn't include some costs that cannot be tallied, like those in the intelligence agencies' black budgets, or the hundreds of millions in impromptu "death gratuities" paid to families of Americans and some foreigners killed in war.

The more disturbing finding, however, is that in the coming years the wars threaten to cost the nation another \$2 trillion – in interest payments on war debt as well as continuing medical expenses for 150,000 wounded veterans.

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