

For What It Is Worth, The Cost of War

By Keith S. Brown

19 March 2006 © Keith S Brown

I read the newsletter "What We Now Know" on a regular basis. The article dated 7 February 2006ⁱ... was particularly engaging as it analyzed the cost of the current war.

In September of 2005, Paul Craig Roberts, former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under President Reagan, produced a set of calculations trying to establish how many American bullets it takes to kill one insurgent.

The official estimated number of insurgents in Iraq has been 20,000. According to reports of the Government Accounting Office (GAO), by September the U.S. military had used up 1.8 billion rounds of small caliber ammunition in Iraq.

That means "U.S. troops have fired 90,000 rounds at each insurgent," states Roberts matter-of-factly. "Very few have been hit... If 2,000 insurgents have been killed, each death required 900,000 rounds of ammunition."

So, 900,000 rounds of small arm ammo per insurgent death? How much more "victory"ⁱⁱⁱ can we afford?

Norman R Augustine, former CEO of Lockheed Martin, wrote an essay that was quoted in the AIAA (American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics) journal back in the early 1980s. As I recall the main thrust was that if you plotted the increasing cost of a single fighter (jet airplane weapon system) versus the rising US budget, they would cross (as I recall) about 2054. And the cost of a single military airplane would be the entire US economy some 20 years later.

It was, if I recall correctly, in that same essay that explored the cost of "death to the enemy". When men stood shoulder to shoulder and hacked away at the enemy with swords and pikes, people died and the dollar-equivalent-cost per death was low. Swords and pikes were cheap, they were not "expended" and were used by succeeding generations. The resulting body counts in that environment were high --- very high.

As battle field weapons became more high tech, not only did the total cost per weapon increase, but the number of resulting deaths per dollar-equivalent decreased. [In the large and on a statistical basis. There were a few actions where the body count per dollar-equivalent-expended were quite high... Due to the gross incompetence of the commanders who ordered mass frontal assaults against machine gun emplacements or similar

insanities. But even then, the body counts were not as high as two armies less than a meter apart, individual combatants hacking away with swords].

With modern aero-dog-fights, victory is phyric --- once you figure in the cost per enemy-death. The unit cost of the Long range Air-to-Air Phoenix missile in 2005 dollars is \$477,131ⁱⁱⁱ. Modern ground warfare appears to be suffering the same fate...

So yes, maybe we can "win" but in the process, will we destroy our economy more thoroughly and more effectively than any external enemy ever could?

War in general has some interesting costs. There are direct costs, indirect costs, and opportunity costs. I suspect the direct costs, which are most easily measured, are actually the least expensive of the lot.

Before someone accuses me of being a pacifist, let me state, I believe there are wars worth fighting... but I've not seen one in some time. And though it is actually irrelevant to the issue, I am ex-US military, with an honorable discharge.

Washington in his farewell address (17 September 1796) made comments that I believe we would do well to heed.

He did not believe a large standing military was a good idea. Apparently such a military force creates political temptations not easily resisted:

Hence, likewise, they will avoid the necessity of ... overgrown military establishments, which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty.

Nor was our first President favorably impressed with political parties:

I have already intimated to you the danger of parties in the state, with particular reference to the founding of them on geographical discriminations. Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party, generally. The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries, which result, gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty. The common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.

He also regarded governmental frugality as very important:

*As a very important source of strength and security, cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is, to use it as sparingly as possible; avoiding occasions of expense by cultivating peace, but remembering also that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it; **avoiding likewise the accumulation of debt**, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertions in time of peace to discharge the debts, which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden, which we ourselves ought to bear.*

I believe a realistic paraphrase of President Washington's view on foreign political alliances is "don't":

The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connexion as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest.

If President Washington were to read a status report on this nation's legacy, I cannot imagine he would be pleased.

We've not only ignored his warnings, we've deliberately countered them.

Our defense budget is the largest in the world. The 4 May 2005 "Jane's Defense Industry" article stated the "US defense budget will equal the Rest-of-the-World within 12 months"^{iv}. Who are we going to fight -- the rest of the world at once, or the combined aliens from the movies "War of the Worlds" and "Independence Day" simultaneously?

The persistent acrimony between the Republicans and Democrats is not conducive of temperate discourse or good manners. Read again Washington's observation on

the elevation of and the accretion of absolute power in a chief and the resulting ruin of Public Liberty.

Frugality is a four-letter word in DC. As long as the establishment can provide a largess to some by picking the pockets of others, they believe they've done their job. I'd be inclined to say our leadership has the morals of a street-walker, but that would insult the working-girls of Austin's 6th street.

With NATO, SEATO, the new US-India Defense Pact, and all the rest, we've obviously tossed that caution on the trash heap as well.

History has many interesting lessons... anyone who claims, "it cannot happen here", simply because this is America, is obviously not thinking clearly about the problem.

Other interesting essays and news stories:

"Things Not Said: Homeland Security and Official Ideology"

<http://www.lewrockwell.com/stromberg/stromberg63.html>

"Why We Fight"

<http://www.lewrockwell.com/kwiatkowski/kwiatkowski142.html>

"Casualty of War: The U.S. Economy"

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/07/17/MNG5GDPEK31.DTL&type=printable>

"Deployments take toll on employers"

http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:YzPxGkcj7EMJ:www.sltrib.com/iraq/ci_3426729+cost+per+casualty+iraq+%22salt+lake%22&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1

Copyright © 2006 by Keith S. Brown

ⁱ http://www.investorsinsight.com/wwnk_print.aspx

ⁱⁱ A Pyrrhic victory is a victory with devastating cost to the victor. The phrase is an allusion to King Pyrrhus of Epirus, whose army suffered irreplaceable casualties when he defeated the Romans during the Pyrrhic War at Heraclea in 280 BC and Asculum in 279 BC. After the latter battle, Plutarch relates in a report by Dionysius:

"The armies separated; and, it is said, Pyrrhus replied to one that gave him joy of his victory that one more such victory would utterly undo him. For he had lost a great part of the forces he brought with him, and almost all his particular friends and principal commanders; there were no others there to make recruits, and he found the confederates in Italy backward. On the other hand, as from a fountain continually flowing out of the city, the Roman camp was quickly and plentifully filled up with fresh men, not at all abating in courage for the loss they sustained, but even from their very anger gaining new force and resolution to go on with the war."

Ironically, in both of Pyrrhus's victories, the Romans lost more men than Pyrrhus did. However, the Romans had a much larger supply of men from which to draw soldiers and their losses did less to their war effort than Pyrrhus's losses did to his. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyrrhic_victory

ⁱⁱⁱ Cost per US Navy website

http://www.news.navy.mil/navydata/fact_display.asp?cid=2200&tid=700&ct=2

^{iv} http://www.janes.com/defence/news/jdi/jdi050504_1_n.shtml