

## February 24, 2008 - Murtha Questions Spending for War

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Editorial

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Anyone familiar with economics knows the term "opportunity cost." It's the cost of pursuing one choice over another. An example: if you choose to spend \$1,000 on a vacation, you lose the opportunity of getting interest payments if that money were invested in a savings account.

When it comes to the war in Iraq, which is costing us \$10.3 billion a month, \$2.4 billion a week, \$343 million a day and \$14.3 million an hour, according to figures from the Congressional Research Service, U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha, D-Johnstown, has compiled some interesting lost "opportunity costs."

Murtha's tabulations are so eye-opening impressive that it's best just to recite them in toto:

- Worried about bridges? For 10 hours in Iraq, we could replace the structurally deficient Masontown and Freeport Bridges (\$140 million).
- Concerned about the cost of gasoline? For one day in Iraq, every passenger vehicle in Pennsylvania could get 15 gallons of gasoline (7.7 million vehicles at \$3.02 per gallon).
- College tuition on your mind? For three days in Iraq, every undergraduate student at Penn State (77,121) and Pitt (22,766) could get a \$10,000 tuition stipend.
- Taxes got you down? For every week in Iraq, every Pennsylvania household could get a \$511 tax rebate (based on 4.7 million households).
- Think the highways are in bad shape? For nine days in Iraq, we could eliminate the maintenance backlog for all Pennsylvania state-owned roads (\$3.1 billion PennDOT estimate).

- Tired of waiting for the Mon-Fayette Expressway to get finished? For 12 days in Iraq, we could complete the entire expressway and the Southern Beltway project (estimated cost of \$4.2 billion).

- Worried that a bridge will fall down? For every four-and-a-half weeks in Iraq, we could repair all 6,000 structurally deficient bridges in Pennsylvania (\$11 billion PennDOT estimate).

- Need infrastructure improvements? For every five-and-half weeks in Iraq, we could replace the aging and deficient sewage systems through Pennsylvania (estimated \$12.7 billion cost over the next 20 years, according to the Environmental Protection Agency).

Murtha's office has another menu of lost "opportunity costs" as well:

- For one day in Iraq, we could provide a Pell Grant for 79,500 needy college students (maximum 2007-8 grant is \$4,310). Or we could enroll 47,500 children in the Head Start Program for an entire year (at \$7,209 per child).

- For one week in Iraq, we could provide 5,000 additional border patrol agents for 10 years (based on an annual salary of \$45,000).

- For four-and-a-half weeks in Iraq, we could double the funding for cancer research at the National Institutes of Health for one year (\$5.6 billion for the 2008 fiscal year).

- For four months in Iraq, we could eliminate the U.S. Army's \$38 billion backlog on flood protection, aquatic restoration and navigational needs.

- For 18 months in Iraq, we could repair all 70,000-plus structurally deficient bridges across the United States (estimated \$188 billion by the American Society of Civil Engineers).

Murtha, an opponent of the Bush administration's strategy in managing the war, says, "This administration borrows \$343 million every day to finance the war in Iraq and continues to shortchange our domestic needs. We must restore fiscal sanity, and that begins by using the \$343 million we are spending every day in Iraq and putting it to use here at home."

As you assess whether we should stay in Iraq or leave, it is prudent to look at how your tax money is being spent, and ask if it's going for the highest and best use. Murtha makes a compelling case that it is not.