

COMMENTARY

Green and red economies



Somehow, both the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have vanished from everyday political talk.

But the economy hasn't. Although the three are inextricably related — the economy and the wars — politicians have mostly abandoned war talk in favor of money talk.

"Economy" comes from a Greek word meaning, "to manage the household." Our American household now looks like the main room of a fraternity house on Sunday morning: one massive mess after the unrestrained indulgences of the previous night.

The U.S. debt as of mid-October was running at about \$10.32 trillion in good American green, as big a morning-after headache as we should ever have to endure, unless we keep funding Arab wars and buying Arab oil with Chinese money. And probably like you, I've never had a clue what such a figure really means.

Meanwhile, fairly sober estimates of the cost of the Iraq War, alone, suggest that we can't prevent it from running up a tab of more than \$1 trillion, even if the troops are withdrawn in 2010 (which won't happen in a McCain/Palin administration). If we go to 2015, we're talking \$2 trillion, according to economics professors at Columbia University.

Have you ever wondered what economists do for fun after they figure out how

badly we've screwed up the economy?

Do they go out and get drunk, or travel to India and sit with a wise man in a cave, or take their credit cards, fly to Paris, and then buy the world's best food and wine until the well runs dry?

More likely, they gather their life savings and bid to buy that painting by Edvard Munch, "The Scream."

Anyway, such a figure doesn't sound too bad, to me: Let's call it an even \$1 trillion for George Bush's war.

Maybe I can understand that figure alone, and never mind the national debt of \$10.32 trillion, with another \$200,000 being added every single second of every single minute of every single hour of every single day, 24/7.

Am I wrong in calculating that \$1 trillion is just a thousand billion? And isn't \$1 billion merely a thousand million?

But using the dialectic — questioning something to death — is clearly not how to get a grip on this figure.

So let's try to understand how much it really is in a different way.

There are 3,077 counties or their equivalents in the United States (parishes in Louisiana and boroughs in Alaska).

What if we spent the money we're laying out in Iraq on the public schools in each of those counties?

We have a trillion to work with, and that's a thousand billion, remember. Each billion is a thousand million, so let's divide it all up among 3,077 counties.

Each county in the United States would now get just over \$330 million. In Collier and Lee, school officials could add that to the \$1.1 and \$1.5 billion bud-

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gets already in place for 2009.

Or how about this? We just divide up the \$1 trillion equally among each of the nation's nearly 75 million children — those who will be 18 or under in 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

If we do that, each kid gets a check for \$13,333. Then we require each of them to put that in savings and to add \$100 a month every month until each is 50.

Now what do we have? We have a nation of rich people, or at least debt-free people, in the mid-21st century.

Don't like kids? Then look at it this way. A Boeing 737 costs about \$50 million. For \$1 trillion, we could buy about 20,000 of them. Then we could provide 400 of these jets to each of the 50 states. Since there are only, on average, 62 counties per state, each state government could distribute 6 or 7 Boeing 737s to each county.

That way, each of the nation's counties could have its own passenger fleet of aircraft for county commissioners to fly their friends to football games at their alma maters, where they could visit their old frat or sorority houses on Saturday night, and to hell with Sunday morning.

But the logistics are probably too complicated for all that. So let's just divide up the \$1 trillion among 300 million Americans (there are actually about 307 million now, I think).

If we did that, every man, woman and child in the United States, even those living

in Wasilla, Alaska, would get something on the order of \$3,000. If you had a family of seven, for example — two parents and five children — you'd get a check for \$21,000.

With that money, if your name was Todd, you could go out and buy four or five brand spanking new Arctic Cat 2008 T660 4-stroke snowmobiles, with heated seats for your cold little fanny, at \$4,200 each (according to www.twotopsnowmobile.com). Then you could drive over and stare across the Bering Straits at Russia, with your wife and kids, just to see if it was still there.

All of that is fantasy, of course. Money is the least of our economic problems, since we can solve dollar debt.

The other economy is the economy of blood. What we can't get back is the 4 to 6 liters of blood — call it 5 on average — in each of the 4,168 Americans killed as of Oct. 16 in Iraq alone, where we never did find a WMD or a fascist named bin Laden.

What if we could buy back all that blood, and those lives, for \$1 trillion?

Here are the economics of it: We'd be purchasing 5,513 gallons of American blood. That's at about 3.78 liters per gallon, and 5 liters per body, in 4,168 American bodies.

The cost? \$181.3 million per gallon of good American red.

Now *that* would be a good investment. ■

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