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Trump and the Six-Trillion-Dollar Question

By Andrew J. Bacevich
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In President Trump’s address to a joint session of Congress earlier this week, White House speechwriters inserted more than a few startling numbers: 4,000 Chicagoans shot in a single year; 60,000 American factories shuttered since 2001; 43 million Americans living in poverty, with an equal number receiving food stamps; 94 million workers having simply given up looking for work; an annual trade deficit just shy of \$800 billion.

Yet the biggest number of all is the one all but guaranteed to attract the least attention in policymaking circles. It’s the number that few in Washington want to talk about or even acknowledge: \$6,000,000,000.

“America has spent approximately six trillion dollars in the Middle East,” Trump observed. As media personalities like to say, that’s trillion with a T. The sums expended pursuant to U.S. military misadventures in that part of the world are so gargantuan, Trump continued, that “we could have rebuilt our country—twice. And maybe even three times....”

A tad hyperbolic? Perhaps, but given that the words were spoken in a building that rings with mind-boggling hyperbole on a daily basis, the judgment comes close enough to the facts to pass muster as essentially accurate. At the very least, it contains a fair amount of what Stephen Colbert terms truthiness.

Yet as a description of how those vanished trillions disappeared, “spent” seems somehow inadequate. That term does not do justice to the epic folly of the authorities, civilian and military alike, who presided over this vast expenditure of treasure.

The concept of “spending” suggests an exchange, something of value offered in return for acquiring an item of like value. The nation—citizens, the body politic—did not “spend” six trillion dollars on misbegotten Middle East wars. A couple dozen officials within the executive branch made the requisite decisions, those decisions ratified by compliant members of Congress.

Nor did those decisions yield the promised return, variously defined as victory, peace, democracy, human rights, or the rule of law. The money wasn’t “spent.” It was squandered, wasted, poured down a rat-hole. And those who participated in the fleecing have now moved on, consciences clear as they unabashedly advise on the necessary next steps.

Where precisely did all that money go? Republicans and Democrats alike profess to find the question without interest or merit.

Most of the trillions have long since sunk into the arid wastes of Iraq and Afghanistan. Remarkably, neither of these two places even qualified for mention in Trump’s hour-long oration.

Instead, the president used the occasion to urge Congress to give the Pentagon more money still—lots more. Trump is calling for “one of the largest increases in national defense spending in American history,” as if attributing the disappointing results of our recent wars to fiscal niggardliness.

For U.S. military leaders, for the national security apparatus as a whole, for defense contractors, and for the Congress itself, Trump was the bearer of good news. As commander-in-chief, he will observe the agreement forged by his immediate predecessors: When it comes to war and basic U.S. national security policy, there will be no accountability and no awkward questions.

There will be no inquiry into the misjudgments and failures that have saddled future generations with a six-trillion-dollar bill. There will be no postmortem. Except at the most trivial level, there will be no learning. There will, however, be more war.

I found myself squirming at the way that Trump and members of Congress collaborated in exploiting the memory of a recently deceased U.S. service member. They used a grieving widow for their own purposes.

Yet the moment captured something essential about where we find ourselves today—political leaders who make a show of respecting those who fight on our behalf while neglecting their own most fundamental responsibilities. I don’t know whether to attribute that neglect to cynicism, corruption, moral cowardice, or simply an absence of imagination. But I do know that it’s contemptible.