Opinion



U.S. soldiers in the fields of Vietnam in 1967 (Pixabay/FotoshopTofs)



by Mary Ann McGivern

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 19, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I spent a portion of tax day collecting signatures to cut military spending. The Peace Economy Project will deliver them to Congress in early June. The War Resisters League figures out each year just how much we are spending on war, including the costs of troops and weapons, in the Department of Defense budget; the price of stockpiled nukes and operation of the nuclear weapons labs in the Department of Energy budget; the cost of past wars within our national debt; the funds needed to care for veterans in the Veterans Administration.

The total is 47 percent of discretionary spending. We don't usually see that figure. Richard Nixon's administration began including Social Security and Medicare in the federal budget, but that money is restricted; it was collected out of our paychecks, and Congress can't redirect how it is spent. Add Social Security into the budget and military spending looks smaller, only a quarter of total spending, which made spending on the Vietnam War appear less, and today's military expenditures, too.

But these days I'm not arguing so much in my mind with federal accounting practices as I am thinking about the cost of caring for our veterans. Brain injuries are a relatively new diagnosis. Being near an improvised explosive device or, worse, being in a tank that rolls over one, damages the brain in ways we are still learning about. Lymphoma is not a new diagnosis, but it is new to the Veterans Administration. Vietnam combatants have been coming in with it.

Two of my brothers are Vietnam combat veterans. They both have heart ailments, and one has diabetes that the Veterans Administration links to Agent Orange. Now my other brother has lymphoma, diagnosed at Christmas, also linked to Agent Orange. Their VA treatment has been excellent, particularly for the lymphoma, which the VA is particularly suited to treat because the medical staff have, regrettably, seen a lot of cases in recent years.

War is terrible. I think sometimes of all the people in Vietnam who suffer from Agent Orange. I think about them more since I've learned how Agent Orange affected my brothers.

But this week I'm thinking more pragmatically about how much war costs in dollars to the U.S. taxpayer. I have railed in these blogs a number of times about the trillion and a half dollar cost of the F-35, other expensive Pentagon boondoggles and the 35.5 billion a year used to maintain our nuclear stockpile.

It's a lot of money — our money — to fund a lot of human suffering. Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry.

[Mary Ann McGivern, a Sister of Loretto, works with people who have felony convictions and advocates for criminal justice.]

Advertisement