

Why are taxes so high? Maybe because we're still footing the bill for Elon Musk's invasion of Afghanistan for lithium mines

By Michael Taylor

This month we will debate tax reform and upcoming tax cuts, and a logical follow-up thought to the tax reform debate is "why does the federal government cost so much to run?"

Each of us will answer that question differently - possibly depending on our political persuasion - but there's overwhelming bipartisan agreement on the need to reduce "waste, fraud and abuse."

Which is why we should all applaud the work of internal government groups like the Special Inspector General For Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, dedicated to reporting on waste, fraud and abuse in our nation's longest war. SIGAR makes quarterly reports to Congress on where our money went and conducts investigations on fraud and enforcement on the Afghanistan conflict, which began in 2001.

If you think like me, you might have this vague gnawing sense that pursuing a perpetual war against a shadowy non-state enemy with no end in sight is the surest way to blow our nation's budget. When you read a SIGAR report, that vague gnawing becomes very specific, with cold hard numbers attached to it.

Here's just one example of \$70 billion in waste. A recent report by SIGAR studied the cost of building up the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, or ANDSF. The money appears mostly wasted.

In 2005, officials estimated a \$7.2 billion price tag for building up the ANDSF. Bolstering internal police and security forces is an important and logical step toward reducing the U.S. military presence there. As the SIGAR report describes in excruciating detail, 15 years and \$70 billion later, our efforts at capacity-building have utterly failed. Afghanistan cannot keep its own peace, and the local security forces are wholly dependent on U.S. support, both financially and militarily.

The devil of this failure is in the details of the report, but the waste, fraud, and abuse is nothing short of mind-boggling.

There's the obvious, like the \$500 million spent on secondhand Italian transport planes that couldn't operate in Afghanistan's harsh conditions.

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Express-News columnist Michael Taylor seen Aug. 11, 2016 in the Express-News photo studio.

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