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**Taylor Hudak (TH):** Hi, everyone, and welcome back to another episode of The Source, I'm your host Taylor Hudak. The post 9/11 wars have been ongoing for nearly 20 years, and President Joe Biden promises that he will withdraw troops from Afghanistan by September, but the question remains: Will he? And has the United States truly recognized the costs of war?

Joining us today is Dr. Stephanie Sevele. Dr. Savell is an anthropologist on militarism, security and civic engagement. She is also the senior research associate at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University and is a project director of Brown University's Costs of War project. Dr. Savell, thank you for joining us today.

**Stephanie Savell (SS):** Thanks so much for having me.

**TH:** Absolutely. So before we get started on the various facts and figures, I want to talk about the background and the history of the Costs of War Project.

**SS:** Yeah, sure. The Costs of War Project was founded in 2011 by my current co-directors, the two professors, Neta Crawford and Catherine Lutz, both of them were at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, at the time. And the goal was really to use research to shed light on the unacknowledged deeper, longer term costs of the US choice to wage the so-called global War on Terror. And of course, now we're about to hit the 20-year mark for those wars. So in many ways, not much has changed. The mission of the project is still to use research to change the terms of public debate and prompt, especially the American public and policymakers, to ask big questions about war: Why are we at war? What are we doing? Is it meeting our supposed goals of keeping people safe, both in the US and around the world? And if we're not, what should we be doing instead? And really using that questioning to work against what we see as a militarized status quo in the United States.

**TH:** Just to put it into perspective, how many other universities or institutions are doing this research?

**SS:** As far as I know, we're one of the only groups. What we're doing really is providing a

bridge between the researchers who are working on these issues and the public. And so what we do is we put public-facing research papers on our research, on our website, and then we do a lot of work behind the scenes to connect that research to people who can use it to advocate for change, as well as the American public. So we're constantly reaching out to journalists and editors and Congress and peace groups and social movements and things like that. So we do a lot of work to kind of make the research accessible and do the work of translation, which often needs to be done, for scholars, especially, who are used to publishing only in academic journals, things like that.

**TH:** Can you tell me about your research in particular, as well as the methodologies that you use?

**SS:** Yeah, sure. So the Costs of War Project gathers the perspectives of over 50 scholars and experts from across the disciplines. So I'm an anthropologist myself. My primary research method is ethnography and meta analysis. We have economists and political scientists and even physicians and human rights practitioners. So we're really trying to look at the major consequences of war and figuring out who is the best kind of expert to answer the questions that we have.

So personally, a couple of the things that I've been working on: one is, I've been looking at the scope of the post 9/11 wars. And one of the things that I always say is we can't end the endless wars if we don't acknowledge their full scope. It's far beyond Afghanistan and Iraq. Currently, in the past few years, we have had counterterrorism operations in 85 countries. It's astounding. So I put out this map that's been featured in USA Today and Smithsonian and other places in various iterations that shows all these different places and it shows the different categories of action, there are the airstrikes and there's on the ground combat, those are kind of the most intense iterations. But then there's also 79 countries where the US is doing so-called training and assistance in counterterrorism.

This is not the innocuous neighborly help that it sounds. A lot of times what we're doing is supplying money and weapons and institutional support for domestic wars on terror that, in fact, are carried out against minority groups or political opponents to the regimes. We are operating under the logic that there's a good state that's fighting evil terrorists. And many times that's far too simplistic of a worldview. A lot of times these are authoritarian regimes to which we're providing weapons and money for military operations. And so those are carried out with really negative consequences.

That's partly what I did, I did kind of a deep dive into one of the data points on my map recently. I went to Burkina Faso, which is a growing hotspot of conflict and Islamist violence. And I looked at what are the consequences of US security assistance for counterterrorism in Burkina Faso. And what I saw was that we set up Burkina Faso and the Sahelian governments for war paradigm approach to the problem of terrorism. From shortly after 9/11, we were in the region doing training, even though US security strategists were not

identifying their region as a primary threat or home to militant Islamist militant groups. But we started doing this training. We started kind of basically exporting a War on Terror mindset. And when the problems in the region arose, which really happened after 2012, Mali was destabilized and there was an influx of weapons from Libya, where NATO had recently toppled Gaddafi, and so basically a bunch of things came together and the Islamist militant violence has kind of spiraled out of control in the region since then. And the US has just been supplying ... I mean, you can see you can track the money that we've provided to Burkina Faso and the money that they spend on their military. Both of them have kind of risen exponentially in recent years, along with the numbers of death. And there's actually just as many people of a minority ethnic group, the Fulani, being killed. Sorry, I should say there's just as many civilians being killed by government forces as there are by Islamist militant groups. So you can really see the kind of really dramatic negative consequences and costs of this war paradigm approach to the problem of terrorism in that region.

So that's what my research is on. I hope to do more in West Africa and keep looking into the consequences of US actions there. A lot of it is pretty shadowy. There's not a lot of information that the government makes public about this. And, you know, even a few years ago, I don't know if you remember, but there are a few soldiers, US soldiers, who died in Niger during an operation there. And the reaction of the US Congress at the time was like, "What? What are you doing in Niger? Like, I didn't even know we had soldiers there." And this is kind of systematically happening all across the African continent. So it's a really kind of an unknown known element of these counterterror wars.

**TH:** Let's talk about some of the recent facts and figures that are on the website. I see that there has been a report or some data that has been posted just recently, back in April, just one month ago. Can you talk about your recent findings?

**SS:** I'll just put them in context. We basically have these big numbers that we put out every year. One of those numbers is the human toll, like how many people have died since 2001 in the US-led post 9/11 wars. That number is up to 801,000 people. And that is in Afghanistan, Pakistan (which is part of the Afghanistan war zone), Iraq, and then there's also Syria, Yemen and some other countries. And we include those, not because we're saying that the US is solely responsible for all the deaths in those conflicts, but that the US-led post 9/11 wars have been an important factor in the intensity of those conflicts. So 801,000 people.

And then the other big number we put out is how much the War on Terror has cost US taxpayers since 2001. And we're up to 6.4 trillion dollars for the wars. That is a much larger figure than what the Pentagon would say the wars have cost. But we include ledger lines like care for veterans of these wars and the interest that we've paid on war borrowing. These have been credit card wars. So most of them have been paid for on borrowed funds and increases to the Pentagon base budget that have happened because of these wars. So it's not just the war fund. So for all of those reasons - it's an argument too; we must take a broader view of the

costs of war.

And then what you are referring to is, we just put out some new numbers in in April about the Afghanistan war, in particular, the cost of war in Afghanistan - which we see is just one part of these larger wars that I'm talking about - have been 2.26 trillion dollars, and the human cost is 241,000 people. And of course, that's just the people who have been killed directly; what we call bombs and bullets, but then there's the indirect deaths, which are many times more. So if you think about people who are displaced from their homes and don't have adequate access to medical care, the amount of medical professionals that have fled the war zones, mental health problems, environmental problems. There are so many ripple effects of war that people feel for generations in the future, those cause a lot of what we call indirect deaths as well.

**TH:** Does the United States create more terrorism?

**SS:** You know, it's really counterproductive to wage a war on terrorists because you kill people and then they get angry and want to retaliate. In Burkina Faso, what I saw was that it is the militant group's best recruiting device - the fact that the army was killing civilians. And so that was one of the major reasons people are joining groups. The other thing that a War on Terror paradigm does, is it erases the reasons why people join terrorist groups in the first place. In addition to revenge and retaliation, it's also just out of poverty, and in West Africa, frustration with governments that people have feel like they have abandoned them, elite corruption, and in some cases, just because it's a job, people are struggling to feed themselves and their families. And you can take up arms as kind of an occupation and a way to do that. So when a government takes this domestic War on Terror approach, it kind of erases the need to address those root causes of terrorism in the first place. So there are lots of things that it does to really foment the problem of militant violence rather than quell it as is the supposed intent. And there are more so-called terrorist groups now than there were on 9/11. There are more recruits to those groups. It's a more widespread phenomenon around the world. So I think you can absolutely say that the US war on terror has been incredibly counterproductive.

**TH:** Now, taking a look back at the figures now, do you take into account other costs, such as opportunity costs? And what I mean by that specifically is could this money be spent perhaps elsewhere, say, in social infrastructure such as health care, education?

**SS:** Yeah, we have a paper by an economist named Heidi Peltier on our site that shows that one of the big kinds of justifications we hear in the United States for pouring money into the military is that it's a job creator. And that's one of the reasons why a lot of Congress people will support a really huge amount of money that goes to the military every year.

And what Dr. Peltier shows is that per dollar spent, if we had invested in education or healthcare instead of in the military, we lost the opportunity to create basically 1.4 million jobs a year in those other sectors. So the investment in the military has absolutely come at the

detriment of these other sectors. And beyond that I think we need to think about how US federal monies are spent, there's mandatory spending and there's discretionary spending, mandatory spending is for things like Social Security and Medicare, and the discretionary spending is for everything else.

So basically, if you think of a pie chart, there is an increasing amount of the pie chart that is spent on the military. It's like 700 billion dollars a year at this point. So that is like 53%, I think, of discretionary spending. A few years back it was less, 50% or 47%. So that's growing, which basically means that it's squeezing out any other policy priority. Anything that you personally can possibly care about is being precluded by the huge amount of money that we're spending on the military every year. And this is one of the reasons why I tell young people this absolutely affects your life. This affects every one of our lives in the United States because our government is choosing to spend its money in this way. And not only that, but as I said, these are credit card wars. A lot of this is borrowed money. And so, you know, even if we stopped paying for these wars right now, we're going to owe like 8 trillion dollars in interest payments alone over the next few decades. So this is going to affect our lives for decades to come. And it's just a horrible thing that, this is what's going to affect what we care about. No one really talks about it, you know.

**TH:** Very, very interesting, Dr. Savell. Why don't we take a brief pause and when we return, we will continue with our discussion with Dr. Stephanie Savell with a focus on the Bush administration as well as a military budget. But first, check out this commercial.

**Advert:** "This is an act of pure journalism. Every journalist in the world should have been cheering Edward Snowden. He did what every journalist is supposed to be devoted to."  
"Because we have evidence that when we do that, things go wrong. "

**TH:** Welcome back to The Source, I'm your host, Taylor Hudak. OK Dr. Savell, I wanted to ask you also about some of the research that's been done on the psychological trauma experienced by people who are in these countries who are affected by these wars, as well as the soldiers and their families.

**SS:** Yeah, it's a great question. First of all, one of the things I've learned in studying war, is the people who are most affected are the people in the war zones. And they're the ones whose lives are ripped apart. US soldiers and veterans are also facing huge mental health issues. But I'll start with the people in the war zones and then I'll go to the soldiers. So it hasn't been well studied and it's an incredibly difficult topic to study.

So I can tell you a story that I think is really indicative of some of these mental health issues. There's this scholar on the left side who writes about Afghan war widows, and there is one woman in particular - she tells the story about how she lost both her husband and her son in a roadside bomb blast. And to kind of cope with her grief, she turns to heroin. There are apparently several American aid programs that are intended to assist Afghan widows, with

income generation, things like that. But they say that you can't be a heroin user if you're going to be receiving aid from these programs. So it tells the story of how, she is just kind of going along with this, and then at one point she kind of just gives up - or she doesn't give up. It's basically almost a defiance. And she says, you know what, I'm not going to comply with your requirements for this assistance, because this is the only way that I can possibly deal with the pain that is my life. And it's not just her life, but at this point, it's decades of serial war in Afghanistan that have left these really deep imprints on the culture, like deep sadness, because, of course, the conflict predates 9/11. There's been the war with the Soviets that the US was involved with before that. So basically, there's this whole kind of system of social support where American programs might judge this woman for being a heroin user, but her neighbors don't. And there's this whole system of kind of neighborly care for heroin users who are suffering the psychological toll of these wars. So this woman is just kind of defiantly refusing to comply with what she's supposed to do in the aftermath of the death of her family. It's just a heart-wrenching story, I think, and really indicative of the decisions that people make, the fact that people are having to cope with living in a war zone for so long and the choices that are left to them to make.

And then for US soldiers and veterans, there are more and more service members and more veterans who are dying by suicide now than in combat. We have a forthcoming paper on this in the next few weeks. The numbers have risen dramatically since 2012. It always used to be that service members had a slightly lower rate of suicide than the general population. Now it's much higher. So the numbers are really striking. And part of the argument of this paper is we don't quite know why suicide has become such a big problem in the post 9/11 wars. But a few of those reasons are the fact that the American public doesn't really recognize and give importance to these wars. So the sacrifice these people are making, they feel really alienated by society when they come back. And also there are advances in medical care which mean that, even when you suffer a really dramatic injury, you're being redeployed. So there is multiple compounded trauma, with many redeployments and many injuries. And the weapons that are being used today are such that there's more traumatic brain injuries than there were in the past. So all of these things combined mean that there's just this massive mental health epidemic in the United States among veterans of these wars. And then you can only imagine what that means for the people in the war zones who are living there and just kind of translate this thing that's been really well studied in the United States in some ways of why is the suicide epidemic happening? You can imagine what's happening in the war zones as well. People don't really know about it.

**TH:** Is militarization an integral part of our economy?

**SS:** Yeah, so there's another myth about the military that people often will say like, oh, you have to give money to the military because you have to support our troops. Basically, of the 700 plus billion dollars a year that goes to the US military, half of that goes to military contractors like Boeing and Lockheed Martin, and some of these big weapons manufacturers. And their CEOs are making hundreds of millions of dollars a year. We've all heard about the

military industrial complex. It's absolutely essential to the way that our economy and our society works. And what we found is that when we present our educational materials to Congress, the people who most understand what we're saying, who we feel most aligned with on questions of the militarization of the US, are both progressives like Bernie Sanders, and then libertarians who are kind of advocates of smaller government and less militarization. But the vast majority of politicians fall in the middle and they are unwilling to ask big questions about whether or not we should be spending all this money on the Pentagon.

There's a proposal to cut the Pentagon budget by 10%. That's not enough, it needs to be much bigger than that. I understand that we need to work incrementally for change, but there's very few people who are willing to kind of question the militarization of US society. And part of that is because the outsized influence that military contracting companies play in Congress. One of our researchers shows that there's this revolving door between these military contracting companies and Congress. Some of the same people are working for both, and so there's a lot of interest in maintaining the system as it is and keeping the Pentagon budget as it is, keeping half of that Pentagon budget, - 350 billion dollars a year or 370 billion in 2019 - going to contractors. And one of my colleagues calls this a camo economy, because it's really camouflaged the true costs of the post 9/11 wars.

**TH:** Let's take a look at the Biden administration. President Biden announced that we will finally be withdrawing from Afghanistan. Are you hopeful, do you think that this is going to become a reality?

**SS:** It was a great first step. Biden was willing to kind of ask questions about what we are doing in Afghanistan. If we wait until this moment when we're ahead, then that will never happen, we'll be there forever. So he was the first president to basically speak about that since the beginning of the War on Terror with George W. Bush in 2001. So that is good. And I hope that he can continue to question, not just the war in Afghanistan, but the wars in these other places that I've been talking about as well.

At the same time, I worry that a kind of a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan allows him to just kind of get off the hook, saying, like, oh, this was this was a campaign promise and I've done it. I've ended the endless war when actually, as I've been talking about, there are counterterrorism operations in so many other countries. And so we really need to kind of rethink those and really stop all across the board. And the other thing is he's kind of militarizing the response to the threat of China and kind of building up, approaching that kind of competition with China, in a really militarized way. So for us, it's not enough. I mean, the post 9/11 wars are really just kind of a case study of the ways that the US goes about things in a militarized way, and we need to question militarization on all of its fronts. And so, it would be horrible if China were just kind of the next excuse to militarize US foreign relations.

**TH:** So we have been at war in the Middle East for a very, very long time. A very long time. I mean, for some people now who are adults, it's been their entire life we've been at war. Has

anything really changed?

**SS:** Yes and no. One of the things I've learned from my colleagues is that one of the major justifications for our US military presence in the Middle East has been to, "maintain stability in the region that we depend on for oil". And one of the things that's shifted is that, as you know, as our economy has shifted away from oil as being the primary source of energy for so many things, and that trend will just continue, we actually don't need a massive military presence in the Middle East. War aside, that has been the kind of guiding philosophy of American relations with the Middle East region for so many years that, because of our decreasing reliance on oil, we actually don't need to be there anymore. So that's a huge thing that's changed.

And climate change is something else that we should talk about, because the Pentagon is a huge contributor to greenhouse gases. It's something like, if it were a country, it would be like 47th in the world compared to other countries. So the military is talking about climate change could lead to greater and greater conflict and yet the measures that they're taking to reduce their own carbon footprint is not nearly enough. It's like solar panels on buildings and vehicles that maybe are electric or whatever. But it's not kind of getting at this fundamental ... like jet fuel that's used in massive quantities, even in military exercises. And it's not getting at the fact that we don't need a massive military presence in the Middle East anymore to support stable access to oil. So those are things that have changed.

Things that haven't changed are the fact that a lot of what's happening is that people are dying. Massive amounts of money are being spent on a war that isn't really getting us anywhere. And those things are remaining constant. There's been an increasing secrecy and lack of transparency on the part of the US government. So we saw even under Obama, there was this strategy to flood so much information on the budget available that it was hard to kind of sort through. With Trump, there was a lot less information. Things were taken off the public record in a really large scale way and so we'll see where Biden comes down on issues of transparency.

**TH:** This is a really broad question, but based on your research and your knowledge, is the United States a force for good?

**SS:** Not when there are guns involved. I think there are a lot of people who would argue that the US presence would mean that there would be a certain standard of human rights that are protected or whatever. But I think that when it comes to militarization and military weapons and tanks and guns, and all the institutional supports that go to prop up war, none of that is a force for good.

There's no way of couching that and saying the US is training foreign troops in human rights. Well, maybe a little bit, but that's not the main message that's being given to a lot of these places, a lot of these countries, governments that are using all of these military equipment and

guns in really authoritarian ways, in ways that repress people. So yeah, that's my answer. Not when there's violence involved.

**TH:** And lastly, how has the Costs of War Project's relationship been with the media?

**SS:** It's been great. In the past few years, we have really ramped up our ability to connect with the media and be taken as a really authoritative source on questions of war and militarism. And now we're being cited by all of the major media in the US. Definitely on the progressive side, and more and more on the conservative conservative side as well. And we see both Democrats and Republican politicians as well, citing our data. So I think we're doing a really good job in kind of getting some of our questions to be more mainstream.

**TH:** Is there anything else that you would like to discuss? Any more myths that you want to dispel or any final points that you want to get across?

**SS:** I'll just say one more thing. There's a group called the Poor People's Campaign. They've generated a moral budget that they call "everybody has a right to live" and they basically identified an easy 350 million dollars in annual military spending cuts. And part of what they're trying to do is show it would be super easy to do things that we're always talking about in this country, like raise the federal minimum wage to 15 dollars, and expand voting rights, and all of many other things that people talk about as being goals. So it wouldn't be so far fetched to think that we could cut our military budget by a significant amount and actually be able to fund some of these other priorities.

**TH:** OK, this has been a great discussion today, Dr. Stephanie Savell, thank you.

**SS:** Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

**TH:** Thank you. And I want to thank you all for watching this episode of The Source. Please make sure that you do give this video a thumbs up. And don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel. And if you like the work that we do here, please donate to our organization. We are fully independent. We take no corporate money and we really depend on your support so we can continue with our independent news and analysis. I'm your host, Taylor Hudak, and thank you guys for watching.

**END**