Congressman David Obey

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Dear Congressman Obey,

In recent years you've expressed your opposition to war spending. I'd like to encourage you to cap off your congressional career by actually refusing to provide the funding for the current escalation in Afghanistan.

You know better than I do that the power to begin, end, oversee, and control the escalation of wars lies in Congress. That the president has gone ahead with the escalation unfunded cannot legitimate it, and those troops can certainly be turned around and be brought immediately home.

Seven months ago you said of Afghanistan: "we need to more narrowly focus our efforts and have a much more achievable and targeted policy in that region, or we run the risk of repeating the mistakes we made in Vietnam and the Russians made in Afghanistan. There are some fundamental questions that I would ask of those who are suggesting that we follow a long term counterinsurgency strategy."

Needless to say, your questions have not been adequately answered.

And you said this: "As an Appropriator I must ask, what will that policy cost and how will we pay for it? We are now in the middle of a fundamental debate over reforming our healthcare system. The President has indicated that it must cost less than $900 billion over ten years and be fully paid for. The Congressional Budget Office has had four committees twisting themselves into knots in order to fit healthcare reform into that limit. CBO is earnestly measuring the cost of each competing healthcare plan. Shouldn't it be asked to do the same thing with respect to Afghanistan? If we add 40,000 troops and recognize the need for a sustained 10 year or longer commitment, as the architects of this plan tell us we do, the military costs alone would be over $800 billion. And unlike the demands that are being made of the healthcare alternatives that they be deficit neutral, we've heard no such demand with respect to Afghanistan. I would ask how much will this entire effort cost, when you add in civilian costs and costs in Pakistan? And how would that impact the budget?"

Needless to say, your questions have not been adequately answered.

Six months ago, you were pushing for a war tax to pay for the wars. ABC News reported: "Obey, a Democrat from Wisconsin, made it clear that he is absolutely opposed to sending any more U.S. troops to Afghanistan and says if Obama decides to do that, he'll demand a new tax -- what he calls a 'war surtax' -- to pay for it. 'On the merits, I think it is a mistake to deepen our involvement,' Obey said. 'But if we are going to do that, then at least we ought to pay for it. Because if we don't, if we don't pay for it, the cost of the Afghan war will wipe out every initiative we have to rebuild our own economy.'"

Three months ago, you voted to end the war in Afghanistan entirely, but that measure failed to pass.

You know better than I that one cannot end a war by funding its escalation.

You know better than I the cost we and our children would pay. You told ABC News: "That's what happened with the Vietnam War, which wiped out [President Lyndon Johnson's social program] the Great Society. That's what happened with the Korean War, which wiped out Harry Truman's Square Deal. That's what happened with the end of the progressive movement before the '20s when we went into World War I. In each case, the cost of those wars shut off our ability to pay for anything else."

You know better than I that this is dishonestly hidden by off-the-books "emergency" supplemental spending bills, which you said 11 months ago you would not use any more.

Today I read this in the Politico: "'I know there's a time problem with that,' Obey said of the war funds. 'But there's also a time problem in terms of issuing pink slips to teachers whose jobs we saved last year that could be lost this year if we don't recognize our responsibility. Yes, the deficit is important long term, but the most important deficit right now is the jobs deficit and the income deficit for people who are out of work. I want to know what the hell we are going to do about it.' . . .

"His unhappiness with the Obama White House has grown with the increased military commitment to Afghanistan at a time of high unemployment at home. Obey stands out as one Democrat who believes the great flaw of the stimulus bill last year was that it was not big enough, and as much as he knows the supplemental funding must move sometime, he won't commit even now to do so by Memorial Day.

"'I'm uncomfortable with the whole God darn thing, and I'm certainly uncomfortable with the fact that we're not paying for it,' he said."

So are we, Congressman. Miserable might be a better word for it than uncomfortable. Despairing would do as well. This war is illegal, immoral, hopelessly counterproductive on its own terms, and economically catastrophic. You don't need me to tell you any of that. But we don't need you to ask rhetorical questions or delay this any further, which only allows the White House to claim a fait accompli. We need you to refuse to be complicit in this policy.

If you were to refuse to fund this escalation and simultaneously introduce a bill to spend $33 billion on green energy jobs, including for former members of the U.S. military, you would be a national hero and would conclude your career in Congress as such.

I'm not sure if that outweighs for you the brutal treatment you would receive from the president and the "leadership," but in case it helps I'm going to ask all of my friends to write and phone you as well.

Sincerely,