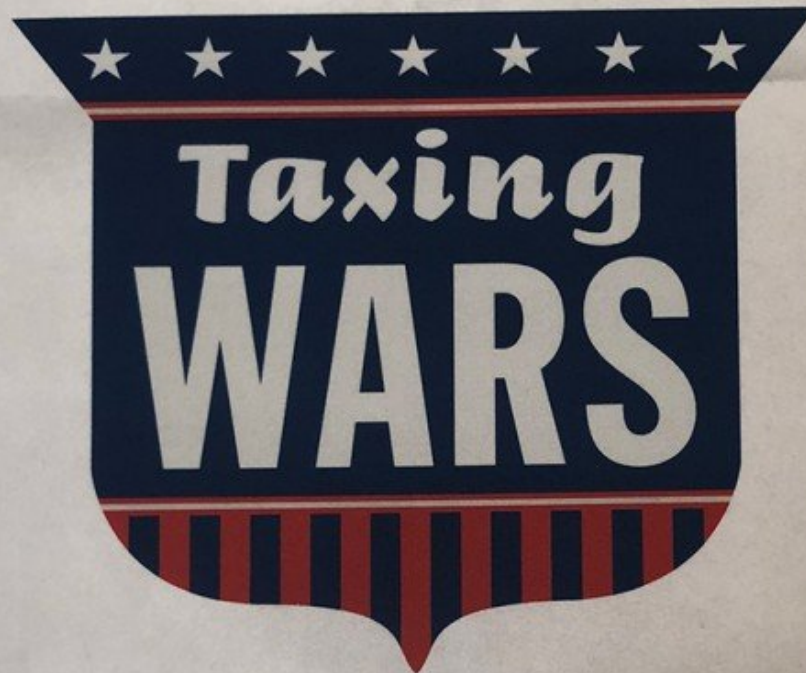


Taxing American wars creates accountability, prevents lengthy conflict

July 13 2018

SARAH E. KREPS



*The American Way
of War Finance*

AND THE DECLINE OF
DEMOCRACY

Credit: Cornell University

Democratic nations are supposed to fight shorter, smarter wars. So why have the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan lasted for more than 15 years?

Sarah Kreps, associate professor of government at Cornell University, argues that part of the reason is the lack of a war tax—a special levy historically paid by the American people during times of war.

Her new book, "[Taxing Wars: The American Way of War Finance and the Decline of Democracy](#)," makes the case that war taxes held leaders accountable, because the public was regularly reminded of war's cost.

"For most of its history, the United States had paid for its wars through war taxes, and then around the Korean and especially the Vietnam wars, the United States started avoiding these taxes and paying for war through debt," Kreps said. "The effect was to create a distance between the public and the war, and erode these accountability linkages and remove these constraints on the ways the United States fights these wars."

The all-volunteer military, the use of drones and the geographical distance all make it easier for most Americans to forget about the wars overseas. But that isn't the whole story, Kreps said.

"A lot of people have studied the all-volunteer military and its effect on the ways wars are fought, but no one had studied the effect of the way wars are financed and how individuals come into contact with these costs," she said. "This should be part of the national conversation."

During the Korean War, President Harry S. Truman levied war taxes

twice in 1950 and a third time in 1951. When he ran for reelection, he was derided as "High Tax Harry" and defeated. President Lyndon B. Johnson learned from Truman's defeat and introduced a war tax just once during the Vietnam War—partly because it would have been politically unpopular, and partly because he feared it would draw scrutiny to other social programs he championed, Kreps said.

Johnson's 1968 war tax was the last time such a tax was used in the United States.

Although reintroducing war taxes seems politically infeasible in the current climate, Kreps said even a small, symbolic tax would likely help raise awareness and public pressure to end wars.

"Something like a five-cent gas tax would at least make people think about it and ask questions about where these resources are going and whether it's still the right strategy," Kreps said. "But there's no public discussion about it, and that's exactly what's been missing and has led us down this path."

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Taxing American wars creates accountability, prevents lengthy conflict (2018, July 13) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-taxing-american-wars-accountability-lengthy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.