

# Two Ways to Pay As You Go

## A Campaign Proposal for Progressives

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Global Research, July 08, 2009

[afterdowningstreet.org](http://afterdowningstreet.org) 8 July 2009

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

The day after ramming through nearly \$100 billion more for wars and \$100 billion in loans to European banks through the IMF, the majority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, Steny Hoyer, introduced a “PayGo” bill, requiring that any spending be paid for with cuts in other spending. But having this law on the books would not have stopped the previous day’s legislation. War “supplemental” bills are deemed “emergencies” and an exception is made for them. And lending money you don’t have and can’t be sure of getting back, through an unaccountable organization with a record of damaging those it claims to help, is not considered spending at all.

Robert Borosage [argues for opposing PayGo](#) on the grounds that deficit spending may be needed in the short term. He also argues that the only place where spending is out of control is healthcare and that this broad legislation would take the focus off healthcare and block necessary spending elsewhere. He also claims that PayGo is a project of the rightwing Blue Dog Democrats that progressives oppose. And Borosage rightly calls out Blue Dogs on their hypocrisy in always voting for wars while chattering about fiscal discipline. So, that’s one approach: oppose PayGo and try to stop it.

But let’s get our facts straight. Hoyer’s bill has 163 cosponsors, most of them not Blue Dogs, a lot of them progressives, or at least what passes for progressives in Congress. PayGo also has the support of President Barack Obama. Healthcare is decidedly not the only place where spending is out of control. I agree with Borosage’s emphasis on healthcare, but not with his fierce opposition to single-payer, which is the only thing that can fix it. If we avoid single-payer, and therefore the compromises that advocating it could facilitate, we are likely to end up with a healthcare “solution” that does involve a lot of wasteful spending — in which case you wouldn’t want PayGo to be on the books, unless you saw opposition to wasteful spending as a legitimate concern in itself. And I do. But the biggest chunk of wasteful spending every year is not on healthcare or any other human good. And it’s not on war supplementals. It’s on the standard military budget. We don’t need deficit spending. We need to move at least a fraction of the wasteful money in the bloated pigged-out Pentagon to programs that serve useful purposes. This is a progressive and a majority position.

But the exceptions for wars and loans are serious exceptions. They could both be addressed through amendments to the PayGo legislation. I want to focus on the war supplementals, because I think they offer an opening for engagement that would leave Borosage and all progressives and a much larger section of the political spectrum happy. My idea is this: we launch a campaign to amend the PayGo legislation to stipulate that no funding for any war that has been ongoing for over five years counts as an “emergency” or

is excluded from PayGo requirements. This would mean that the next war supplemental bill could not be passed without some explanation of where the money was going to come from. (Congressman John Murtha has promised another supplemental this year, having waited to do so until just after the passage of the last one, which was sold as being the final such bill.) Such a campaign could simply target Hoyer to amend his bill to agree that wars that have been dragging on for over five years are not emergencies. Or it could work with Congressional supporters to gather support for an amendment to that effect or a sign-on letter committing members to reject PayGo unless that change is made.

What would such a campaign produce? For certain it would call out all the hypocrites in a very visible way. All of those Republicans and Blue Dogs and everybody else who votes for war money, and does so extra-irresponsibly off-the-books, would have to put up or shut up about fiscal responsibility. Every time they opened their mouths about fiscal responsibility they could be asked whether they thought wars over five years were emergencies. Every time they said we should pay as we go they could be asked if we should pay as we kill as well. Such a campaign would generate opposition to PayGo and allow Congress Members to oppose it as hypocritical and pro-war waste. And such members need not commit to supporting PayGo if it is amended to include war supplementals. They could still choose to oppose it.

But what if the amendment were made? What if members had committed to supporting PayGo? It would then be a PayGo that, in the minds of everyone, was about the military as well as human needs. We would then have put on the table the question of Pentagon waste, while requiring fiscal discipline — which, yes, is a good thing. This is the question progressives should consider: do we want money for human needs to be borrowed from our grandchildren or taken away from the war machine? That shouldn't be a difficult choice.

**David Swanson** is the author of the upcoming book *“Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union”* by Seven Stories Press. You can pre-order it and find out when tour will be in your town: <http://davidswanson.org/book>. Arrange to review it on your blog and Seven Stories will get you a free copy. Contact crystal at [sevenstories dot com](http://sevenstories.com).

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