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\$3B price tag to bring gear home from Afghanistan

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A year from now, the Pentagon plans to have shipped home, sold or scrapped virtually every weapon, truck and rucksack it has sent to fight the war in Afghanistan.

It's an enormous task. About 1.5 million pieces of equipment ranging from armored trucks and ammunition to radios and rifles remain for the war that started in 2001. The job is complicated by Afghanistan's rough roads and lack of a seaport. Shipping stuff home will total \$3 billion.

"We're looking around and cleaning out the garage," said Maj. Gen. Edward Dorman, a top Army logistician.

The Army, the lead service in the salvage-and-shipping operation, started the year facing a \$28 billion mountain of gear. So far, about \$11 billion worth of goods has come home and 330 of 400 bases have been closed.

About \$7 billion in materiel will be left behind — sold to allies, given to the Afghan government or cut up and auctioned for their metal. For example, some Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) trucks the Pentagon developed during a crash program to build and ship to protect troops from roadside bombs are headed for the scrap yard.

Gordon Adams, a professor at American University and former defense official in the Clinton administration, said the military's triage on what gets fixed and what is left behind requires costly choices.

"Is war wasteful? Yes," Adams said. "Is ending war wasteful? But bringing back something and pretending you're going to use it is even more wasteful. It doesn't do anybody any good if you just bring it back and park it."

The \$3 billion shipping fee, Adams said, is "pretty cheap" given the amount of gear to be moved and the planes, trains, trucks and ships required for the job.

The cheapest route is putting the gear on trucks and hauling it cross country and through Pakistan to the main port in Karachi. Then it's put on ships and sailed back to U.S. ports such as Beaumont, Texas. All told, that route can take about 160 days.

Air freight is the most expensive. Sensitive equipment can be flown home as fast as one day.

The bottom line is that war is expensive. Even as U.S troops withdraw — about 60,000 remain and all are scheduled to leave by the end of 2014 -- the Pentagon spends \$5.9 billion a month in Afghanistan.

"We have a lot of stuff there. Inevitably, we overbought," Adams said. "We always do when we go to war."