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The United States faces a default on its debt in early June if a deal on the debt ceiling is not reached between the Biden administration and Republicans in Congress before then. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy is pushing for sweeping budget cuts and new work requirements for recipients of government programs, including Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and SNAP. Notably, however, neither Republicans nor Democrats are proposing cuts to one of the biggest drivers of the nation's debt: the massive U.S. military budget. "We've got to get this military-industrial lobby under control, but it's hard to do, because it's a bipartisan affair," says our guest, economist Jeffrey Sachs, whose recent article is headlined "America's Wars and the US Debt Crisis."

AMY GOODMAN: Negotiations are continuing in Washington, D.C., over raising the debt ceiling. The United States faces a default on its debt in early June if a deal is not reached between the White House and Congress. On Tuesday, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy privately told Republican lawmakers he was, quote, "nowhere close" to an agreement with the White House. McCarthy and President Biden had met at the White House Monday after Biden cut short his trip to Asia.

McCarthy is pushing for sweeping budget cuts and new work requirements for recipients of government programs, including Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The Republicans, however, are not proposing cuts to one of the biggest drivers of the nation's debt: the massive U.S. military budget.

According to the Costs of War Project at Brown University, U.S. wars since the September 11th attacks have cost over \$8 trillion. A separate report by the group estimates 4.6 million people have died since 9/11 as a result of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Somalia. And over the past 16 months, Congress has approved more than \$113 billion for Ukraine following Russia's invasion.

We're joined now by the economist Jeffrey Sachs. He is the director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University, president of the U.N. Sustainable Development Solutions Network, has served as adviser to three U.N. secretaries-general, currently serves as a sustainable development solutions advocate under Secretary-General

António Guterres. He recently wrote an [article](#) headlined “America’s Wars and the US Debt Crisis.”

Professor Sachs, welcome back to *Democracy Now!* Well, why don’t you lay it out for us? Talk about what’s happening in Washington, the historic possibility that the U.S. could renege on the — could possibly not lift that debt ceiling, and what that means, and how that fits into the budget that Republicans want cut and the budgets they not only want not to cut, but to increase.

JEFFREY SACHS: Well, great to be with you.

You know, it is startling that since the year 2000, the debt that the U.S. government owes to the public has gone from about 35% of our national income to nearly 100% of our national income, or GDP. That has been dramatic because we have been engaged in nonstop wars literally since the start of this new century — Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen and now Ukraine. And we have spent a fortune. But no president has said to us, “These wars are so important that we should pay taxes.” They’ve just put it on the borrowing. And as that Watson Institute study has shown, that you cited, the one at Brown University, these wars have cost us around \$8 trillion. That’s direct military outlays. That’s ancillary costs. That’s the veterans’ medical expenses. This has been a very significant proportion of the rise of this debt. Another significant proportion was the financial sector, the Wall Street bailout in 2008 and the pandemic costs. But the wars have been a huge deal.

And it’s bipartisan. This isn’t Republicans or Democrats. Neither party wants to talk about the elephant in the room, which is that we are currently at an incredibly destructive, disastrous and, I would say, avoidable war. The toll is rising, of course, in destruction and human lives, but also in outlays. You mentioned the \$113 billion. And there’s more to come, if this administration gets its way. They’re not talking about this in these negotiations. They’re talking about cutting help for the poorest people in this country and to continue the warmongering and feeding the military-industrial complex. That’s why I wrote the [article](#), because it’s shocking. It’s both parties that are not talking about the real issue here.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, Jeffrey Sachs, if you could talk, as well — you talk about these as wars of choice — what you mean by that, and also the issue of the pressure now to, quote, “modernize” the U.S. military to face potential conflicts with China as another strategic plan that will result in more military spending in the future?

JEFFREY SACHS: These are not only wars of choice, the ones that I mentioned. They are wars of lies, because we've never been told the truth about what these fights are about, why we're doing it. Of course, Iraq famously was on completely phony pretenses, but that's not the only one. All of them have been based on lies.

When it comes to Ukraine, we knew — our diplomats knew and warned that the continued pressure by the military-industrial complex to expand NATO to Ukraine would provoke war. But they never told the American people that. They never explained it. And 'til this day they haven't explained what this war is really about.

You think about Libya. Again, lies. No explanation. Violation of the U.N. Security Council. You think about Syria. Not only was the whole Syrian effort a lie of the United States, it's never even been explained to the American people that this was an operation that President Obama ordered the CIA to overthrow the Syrian government. It failed, but it was extremely costly and destructive.

So, these have been wars of choice and wars of lies. They are pushed by the military-industrial complex. They are pushed by neoconservatives in both parties. Now we have new drumbeats of war, not only — as if Ukraine was not devastating and threatening enough with nuclear annihilation, now we're talking war with China. Unimaginable. It could end the world. And yet this is normal discourse in what passes for grown-up discussion in Washington, which is not grown-up at all, in my opinion.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And I wanted to ask you — you mentioned Ukraine. You've written often about this whole way that the American — top officials in the U.S. government, as well as the media, talk about the Ukraine war and Russia's entry, invasion as unprovoked, this whole issue of being an unprovoked war.

JEFFREY SACHS: I noted that *The New York Times* has used the word “unprovoked” regarding this invasion 26 times in its editorials, its opinion columns and its invited guest op-eds. They don't talk about the truth, which is that our own diplomats — I'm talking about U.S. diplomats, including CIA Director William Burns, who wrote a memo that was released by WikiLeaks in 2008. His 2008 memo said this is existential, from Russia's point of view. If we continue to push

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enlargement to Ukraine, this could have absolutely dire consequences. Our diplomats have known this all along. But it's been the politicians, it's been the military-industrial complex, it's been the big companies that have been championing

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enlargement. That's a lot of weapons sales if you do that.

Even though the risks are completely understood inside the government by serious people, they're just not heeded. And this has been true about Ukraine all along. And up until the end of 2021, Vladimir Putin put on the table a draft U.S.-Russia security agreement that was based on don't expand NATO to Ukraine. And that has been Russia's refrain for 30 years, and yet we don't heed it, and now we're \$113 billion into this. It is horrible for Ukraine. We've trapped yet another country in the middle of our lobbying campaigns, because this isn't going to work out well for Ukraine. It's a disaster. It's like how it worked out for Afghanistan. So, this is what's really going on. And I wish that *The New York Times* would carry some truth in this to explain what this is really about.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Jeffrey Sachs, you also have been critical of Russia's brutal invasion. And I'm wondering how you see this ending now. And also, as we started, if you could talk about how you see this debate on lifting the debt ceiling ending?

JEFFREY SACHS: Well, this war is going very badly. There were tens of thousands of deaths in this Bakhmut battle just now that Russia has won and Ukraine has lost. And the estimates are that just this one narrow battle cost billions and billions of dollars, not to mention the disaster of how many deaths. So, they're running through money like there is no tomorrow. And if we're not careful, there will be no tomorrow.

We need to negotiate a stop to this war, whether it's an armistice or a real peace agreement. That is what China is saying. That's what Brazil is saying. That's what South Africa is saying. That's what India is saying. Major countries around the world that aren't part of this NATO-Russia conflict are saying, "Stop, before this completely engulfs the whole world," which it is at risk of doing. So, I think that moving to negotiations now, whether it's stopping the fighting and freezing the lines, whether it is really a peace agreement based on Russia leaves and NATO

doesn't go in — this has been the core issue from the very beginning — this is feasible, and the world is demanding it, outside of the so-called Western, what's really

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and U.S.-allied, world versus Russia. So, that, I think, is how we could spare lives, save the

world and help the budget, by the way.

When it comes to these negotiations on the debt ceiling, I really hope that these negotiators face up to the fact that our military budget, which is 40% of worldwide military spending, is brought dramatically under control, because that's really how to save money. We are 40% of the world total military spending right now, and more than the next 10 countries combined. We've got to get this military-industrial lobby under control, but it's hard to do, because it's a bipartisan affair. The Congress and the White House, on both sides, is beholden to this seemingly all-powerful lobby. But this all-powerful lobby is driving us to ruin.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, Jeff Sachs, I have one final question about both the wars in Afghanistan that the United States — when the United States backed mujahideen forces against — when Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Army, many of those guerrillas that the U.S. backed ended up returning to their Arab and African countries and became the basis of jihadist groups like al-Qaeda. There was the unexpected blowback of that U.S. support of that war in Afghanistan. Are we potentially seeing a similar blowback from the war in Ukraine, which has been a country that's become a magnet, even before the Russian invasion, for neo-Nazi and ultra-right groups from Europe and even the U.S.? Could these foreign fighters now battling Russia in Ukraine become a danger to European democracies in the future?

JEFFREY SACHS: Of course. And it's a very well-put point. But I would say something even more stunning about this. It used to be said, for decades, that the U.S.-backed the mujahideen in Afghanistan to confront the Soviets, who had invaded Afghanistan. But Zbig Brzezinski let us know the truth a few years ago, before he passed away. And that was that the U.S. supported the mujahideen first as bait to induce the Soviet Union to invade. We started it. We started arming an insurrection to help pull the Soviet Union into an invasion in Afghanistan. It's shocking in its cynicism, and it left that country at nonstop war and destruction from 1979 until today, a completely ruined, wrecked, hunger-ridden, famine-ridden society more than 40 years, because the U.S. was playing a covert game, with all the backlash that you note rightly, that it created al-Qaeda. It created so many disasters down the road. But it started as a great game, as if this were a game.

AMY GOODMAN: Jeffrey Sachs, we want to thank you for being with us, director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University, president of the U.N. Sustainable Development Solutions Network. We'll link to his recent pieces, ”

[America's Wars and the US Debt Crisis](#)

” and ”

[The War in Ukraine Was Provoked—ad Why That Matters to Achieve Peace](#)

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