

The Biden Era Is Witnessing a Return of the Military-Industrial Complex

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One of the top national security think tanks backing the Biden administration, the Center for a New American Security, has been taking money from every major defense contractor while pumping out a steady stream of research supporting those companies’ interests. It’s yet another sign that Biden’s promised “return to normal” has, unfortunately, arrived.

The promise of a “return to normal” under **Joe Biden** always meant two possibilities. It could mean a hard break from the obscene, in-your-face corruption and self-dealing that defined Donald Trump’s presidency. Or it could mean going back to the kind of run-of-the-mill, revolving-door Washington corruption that Trump had pledged to clean up, but ended up wallowing in.

According to a [new report](#) by the Revolving Door Project, titled “The Military-Industrial-Think Tank Complex: Conflict of Interest at the Center for a New American Security,” it looks to be the latter option that is so far prevailing in the Biden years. Released yesterday, the report charges top Democratic foreign policy think tank the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) of “at best, a serious deficiency of accountability,” and at worst, “a systematically corrupt arrangement” that sees it promote its corporate sponsors’ interests while passing it off as a public good.

The report recounts several examples of this arrangement. In 2009, for instance, CNAS published a report maintaining that the controversial use of private military contractors was essential and “here to stay” in wars like Afghanistan, all while taking money from several different firms providing those very services. One of these firms, DynCorp, was on the receiving end of \$2.8 billion of the state department’s Afghanistan operations funding from 2002 to 2013, or 69 percent of the total sum.

In another case, a 2018 CNAS report charged that the Air Force’s plans to buy a hundred B-21 bombers did “not go far enough,” pushing the military to add fifty to seventy-five more jets at an extra cost of \$32.8-49.2 billion. Those profits would have gone to the bomber’s maker, Northrop Grumman, an arms manufacturer that also happened to direct more than half of its total think tank donations during the 2014–19 period to CNAS.

A year before that, CNAS had charged the UAE embassy in the United States \$250,000 for a report advocating looser rules for exporting US drones (“I think it will help push the debate

in the right direction,” the ambassador wrote in a thank you e-mail), before publishing a separate paper calling on Trump to loosen those restrictions. The UAE ended up signing a nearly \$200 million deal for the drones with General Atomics, whose billionaire chairman and CEO, Neal Blue, is both a generous donor to CNAS and sits on its board of advisors.

In these and other examples, the report states, the center failed to disclose the conflicts of interest in their reports, despite noting the existence of a policy on such conflicts in their tax filings. It also repeatedly violated the “very clear line” CNAS cofounder **Kurt Campbell** — then about to serve in Barack Obama’s state department, and now serving on Biden’s national security council — testified about in his 2009 confirmation hearing: that the CNAS doesn’t write about specific products its donors make, but rather stays limited to big picture foreign policy ideas.

The center’s reliance on the corporate sector, particularly military contractors, is extensive, having taken donations from all “big five” such firms in the last decade, along with twenty-four others. According to a Center for International Policy [report](#) released last year, CNAS got more defense contractor money than any of the top fifty US think tanks it analyzed. That’s in addition to contributions from NATO, the governments of the United States and eleven other allied countries, and corporate titans spanning fossil fuel, financial, tech, and other sectors, all of whom have given generously to CNAS over the years.

As the report points out, CNAS’s own cofounder — **Michèle Flournoy**, tipped to be Biden’s defense secretary before her own extensive conflicts of interest [derailed her](#) — pointed out the issues with a corporate funding model in a 2014 speech.

“Every funder has intent. They’re giving you money for a reason,” she said. “There are some organizations that call themselves ‘think tanks’ that actually accept money from corporations to do very specific work that tends to advocate the programs those companies produce, and I think that sort of ... makes the waters more murky.”

“The scale and scope of conflicts of interest that appear in CNAS’s work and the influence that its donors may be exerting on policy further highlights serious concerns about political corruption,” wrote Brett Heinz, coauthor of the report.

Of course, CNAS is far from unique. A [whole host of think tanks](#), including those in the foreign policy sphere like the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the [Atlantic Council](#), regularly overlap their advocacy work with the interests of their well-heeled benefactors. But few have as much influence on the workings of the US government, with at least thirteen of the center’s alumni ending up in the Biden administration to date. As the foreign policy equivalent of the Center for American Progress, this is, after all, why CNAS exists: to serve as the future Democratic administration’s [foreign policy team in waiting](#).

Washington, it seems, is finally back in the guiding hands of the experts who were always meant to be running the show. This also means that, true to Biden’s promise, the city has reverted back to the same, unremarkably money-driven state that Trump first used to take power four years ago.

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Featured image: A U.S. Air Force loadmaster assigned to the 746th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron performs a preflight inspection on a C-130 Hercules at Baghdad International Airport, Iraq, Dec. 9, 2019. The 746th EAS maintains a constant presence in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, supporting U.S. and Coalition aircraft in various operations in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Bethany E. La Ville)

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