

“An Immense Military Establishment”: Eisenhower’s Worst Fears Have Been Realized...

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President Eisenhower’s [warned us](#) about the growing threat from the powerful military-industrial complex – and it’s threat to our prosperity – 50 years ago.

As NPR [notes](#):

On Jan. 17, 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower gave the nation a dire warning about what he described as a threat to democratic government. He called it the military-industrial complex, a formidable union of defense contractors and the armed forces.

Eisenhower, a retired five-star Army general, the man who led the allies on D-Day, made the remarks in his farewell speech from the White House.

Eisenhower used the speech to warn about “the immense military establishment” that had joined with “a large arms industry.”

Here’s an excerpt:

“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist.”

Eisenhower was worried about the costs of an arms race with the Soviet Union, and the resources it would take from other areas — such as building hospitals and schools.

Another concern ... was the possibility that as the military and the arms industry gained power, they would be a threat to democracy, with civilians losing control of the military-industrial complex.

Eisenhower also [said](#):

Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

As James Ledbetter [wrote](#) in the New York Times last month:

It is not a stretch to believe that this armaments industry — which profits not only from domestic sales but also from tens of billions of dollars in annual exports — manipulates public policy to perpetuate itself. But Eisenhower was concerned about more than just the military's size; he also worried about its relationship to the American economy and society, and that the economy risked becoming a subsidiary of the military.

Eisenhower warned that the influence of the military-industrial complex was “economic, political, even spiritual” and that it was “felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government.” He exhorted Americans to break away from our reliance on military might as a guarantor of liberty and “use our power in the interests of world peace and human betterment.”

On this score, Eisenhower may well have seen today's America as losing the battle against the darker aspects of the military-industrial complex. He was no pacifist, but he was a lifelong opponent of what he called a “garrison state,” in which policy and rights are defined by the shadowy needs of an all-powerful military elite.

The United States isn't quite a garrison state today. But Eisenhower would likely have been deeply troubled, in the past decade, by the torture at Abu Ghraib, the use of martial authority to wiretap Americans without warrants and the multiyear detention of suspects at Guantánamo Bay without due process.

Finally, even if the economy can bear the immediate costs of the military, Eisenhower would be shocked at its mounting long-term costs. Most of the Iraq war expenses were paid for by borrowing, and Americans will shoulder those costs, plus interest, for many years to come.

A strong believer in a balanced budget, Eisenhower in his farewell address also told Americans to “avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own ease and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow.” Too many of today's so-called fiscal conservatives conveniently overlook the budgetary consequences of military spending.

The Independent [pointed out](#) Monday:

If you doubt, half a century on, that Dwight Eisenhower had it right, then consider the advertisements on WTOP, the Washington region's all-news radio station. Every big metro area in the US has one, where car dealerships tout their bargains, and fast food chains promote a new special offer.

WTOP has all that. But it boasts other advertisers too, with names such as Boeing, Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics.

These almost otherworldly ads, with patriotic music playing softly in the background, are aimed at a very restricted audience: the government that is

their only customer for such wares. For the rest of us, they are proof that in the capital of the world's richest democracy, the defence industry is a very big player indeed.

Adjusted for inflation, US national security spending has more than doubled since Eisenhower left office. Year after year, the defence budget seems to rise - irrespective of whether the country is actually fighting major wars, regardless of the fact that the Soviet Union, the country's former global adversary, has ceased to be, and no matter which party controls the White House and Congress.

One common thread however exists: the military-industrial complex, or perhaps (as Eisenhower himself described it in a draft of his speech that was later amended) the military-industrial-congressional complex. Others have referred to the beast as the "Iron Triangle".

In one corner of the triangle stands the arms industry. The second is constituted by the government, or more precisely the Pentagon, the end-consumer of the industry's output. In a totalitarian state, such as the Soviet Union, that combination would be sufficient. The US however is a democracy, and a third corner is required - an elected legislature to vote funds to pay for the arms. This is Congress, made up of members who rely on the defence industry for many jobs in their states and districts, and for money to help finance their every more expensive re-election campaigns.

A treasure trove of old documents, covered with dirt and pine needles and discovered last year at a cabin in Minnesota once owned by Eisenhower's chief speechwriter Malcolm Moos, reveals that the 34th president had been working on the speech since mid-1959. It went through at least 21 drafts; in a later one, the "congressional" reference was struck out because, it is supposed, Ike did not want to upset old friends on Capitol Hill. But the "military" part was there from the outset.

In reality, the dangers of Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex" are not new; from the earliest days of the Republic, political leaders have warned of them. "Overgrown military establishments," George Washington said in his own farewell address of 1796, "are under any form of government inauspicious to liberty."

Once again, one might note, Eisenhower hit the mark in January 1961. Back then, budgets were more or less balanced, and the possibilities of the future seemingly boundless. Even so he urged his countrymen to "avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own ease and convenience the precious resources of tomorrow". That of course is what has happened with the "credit card" wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, whose costs will burden American taxpayers for years to come.

As the director of the Arms and Security Initiative at the New America Foundation [told](#) Democracy Now today, the big defense contractors "recycle *our* money into the political system". He pointed to one example:

[The Lockheed companies] spend about \$12 million per election cycle, either on lobbying or on candidates. And they have people like Buck McKeon, who runs the Armed Services Committee now. They're the biggest donor to him. They're the biggest donor to Daniel Inouye, who runs the Appropriations Committee in the Senate.

And investment legend Jeremy Grantham's most recent [newsletter](#) argues that President Eisenhower's worst fear have come true, and makes some hard-hitting points about finance and government as well:

Historians may well look back on this period, say, from 1960 on, as the "Selfish Era" - a time when individualism and materialism steadily took precedence over social responsibility. (To be fair, in the period from 1960 to 1980, the deterioration was slow, and the social contract dating back to the mid-1930s was more or less intact.) Personal debt grew slowly at first but steadily accelerated, even though it can be easily demonstrated that consumers collectively are better off saving to buy and that the only beneficiary of a heavy debt society is the financial industry, whose growth throughout this period was massive, multiplying its share of a growing pie by a remarkable 2.2 times...

The financial industry, with its incestuous relationships with government agencies, runs a close second to the energy industry. In the last 10 years or so, their machine, led by the famously failed economic consultant Alan Greenspan - one of the few businessmen ever to be laughed out of business - seemed perhaps the most effective. It lacks, though, the multi-decadal attitude-changing propaganda of the oil industry. Still, in finance they had the "regulators," deregulating up a storm, to the enormous profit of their industry. Even with the biggest-ever financial fiasco, entirely brought on by the collective incompetence they produced ("they" being the financial regulators and the financial industry leaders working together in some strange, would-be symbiotic relationship), reform is still difficult. Even with everyone hating them, the financial industry comes out smelling like a rose with less competition, profits higher than ever, and not just too big to fail, but bigger still.

Other industries, to be sure, are in there swinging: insurance and health care come to mind, but they seem like pikers in comparison. No, it's energy and finance in coequal first place, military-related companies an honorable third, and the rest of the field not even in contention. And now, adding the icing to the corporate cake, we have the Supreme Court. Formerly the jewel in the American Crown, they have managed to find five Justices capable of making Eisenhower's worst nightmare come true. They have put the seal of approval on corporate domination of politics, and done so in a way that can be kept secret. The swing-vote Senator can now be sand-bagged by a vicious advertising program on television, financed by unknown parties, and approved by no stockholders at all!

All in all it appears that Eisenhower's worst fears have been realized and his remarkable and unique warnings given for naught. From now on, we should tread more carefully. Honoring President Eisenhower's unique warnings, we should perhaps not take this 50-year slide lying down. Squawking loudly seems preferable.

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