

# Guns Over Butter: The Military-Industrial Complex and the Destruction of the U.S. Economy

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*The American political system continues to ignore President Eisenhower's dour warning about the Military-Industrial Complex and embrace President Reagan's happy "We're No. 1" illusions. The long-term consequences of this choice have been devastating to most U.S. citizens and to the world.*

Years ago I read a newspaper story about an elderly man who lived in an impoverished area of Cleveland, Ohio. The man was a friendless loner who seemed to have no caring family members. Neighbors had noticed his mail piling up on his porch, and, with no responses to knocks on the door, they called the police who broke into the man's house.

What they found is an allegory for our time, especially after another, peculiarly American school shooting, the latest one involving non-hunting weapons and the gunning down of 26 defenseless little children and staff members at an elementary school.

The withered old man was found dead in his bed, surrounded by rifles, pistols and guns of every description. Boxes of bullets and cartridges were stacked on the floor. He had a knife in his cold, dead hand and an actual harpoon was leaning against his refrigerator, *which was empty*. In a nation of plenty and with grocery stores in the man's neighborhood, the well-armed man had starved to death.

He had fiercely exercised his precious Second Amendment rights but had ignored his neighbors, family and his health. He had apparently heard the National Rifle Association's sermons about defending one's property against intruders - by lethal means if necessary - but he had chosen to remove himself from civil society and starved to death, all alone in his well-defended room.

The man had wasted away, in a paranoid state, while "defending" himself against imaginary "others" who never did come to rob him. He had spent all of his money, including his Social Security and pension checks, on guns and ammunition, but he had spent nothing on food or life-sustaining activities. He was obsessed by the fear of burglars and thieves, and it had cost him his life.

And, what was perhaps a more tragic reality, he had been suspicious of his neighbors, all of whom were potential friends, although many were probably keeping their distance from the crazy old man with the guns.

## Painful Lessons

Our paranoid, militarized and heavily armed nation will probably ignore the lessons that

should be obvious from that story. The arms race that financially bankrupted the Soviet Union and morally (and nearly financially) bankrupted the United States during the Cold War, was run at the expense of the sick, hungry, under-employed, homeless and desperate people everywhere, including many who were living, unnoticed, in our own neighborhoods and in our local ghettos on the other side of the tracks.

Mutual fear of the “other” caused the two Superpowers and their allies to spend obscene amounts of money on inedible and unnecessary weapons systems. The training of tens of millions of “kill or be killed” warriors who were both spiritually and emotionally deprived and deformed (often for the rest of their lives) inevitably weakened the moral integrity of the nation as well, all in the name of “national security.”

Contrary to what patriots who believe in American exceptionalism (and expect the rest of us to believe as well), America hasn't been able to afford both guns and butter without borrowing money in order to keep that delusion going.

The Pentagon's wars ever since the Reagan years have been mostly paid for with massive amounts of borrowing and huge indebtedness rather than with increased taxes, and the return on that “investment” has been lousy. The investor classes and lending institutions were happy however for they are the ones who receive the guaranteed interest payments on the T-bills and Treasury bonds.

But the increasing number of under-water private citizens are finding themselves forced to use credit cards to even pay for basic human necessities like food, water, clothing, health care, shelter and education. The increasing amount of joblessness, homelessness, home foreclosures and bread lines shouldn't surprise anybody.

#### Emaciation of Militarized Nations

During the Cold War, the two saber-rattling superpowers each spent/wasted an irretrievable \$12 trillion. America spent trillions of dollars recruiting, training and retaining troops; researching, developing and producing expensive weapons systems; maintaining hundreds of budget-busting military bases in countries ruled by brutal dictators and friendly fascist states as well as quasi-democracies, all the while virtually ignoring the growing numbers of impoverished and under-privileged people of color who helplessly watched their health, savings, civil rights, jobs and food security wither and disappear.

America has been ruled by a powerful insider group of over-privileged, body-guarded, chauffeured and essentially conscienceless Wall Street elites who live in gated communities. They are also among the One Percenters who have been fingered by the Occupy Wall Street movement as the criminal culprits who created the financial mess America is in.

The so far unindicted and not yet behind bars One Percenters were responsible for the Great Recession, which may still become the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's version of the Great Depression. The nefarious corporations that are responsible for the economic crash of 2008 have, with their ill-gotten gains, bought and paid for most of the major media and also many of the bribed politicians and judges, all of whom are faithfully serving their paymasters by helping to implement their agendas in statehouses around the nation.

Most of these pro-corporate political leaders (both un-elected and elected, including five of the nine U.S. Supreme Court justices) are dutifully promoting their greedy agendas. These

traitors to real democracy only preach fiscal responsibility when the bottom lines of their paymasters are at risk, but they never seem to act when people in the lower 99 percent are in a financial crisis – including those needing jobs, healthcare, relief from Hurricane Sandy or protection from illegal foreclosures.

The moneyed ruling class, with large fortunes and investments to hide and protect, has conveniently forgotten that its Reaganomics-inspired predatory lending and the massive borrowing and spending tactics (the propaganda trick called “trickle-down” economics) skyrocketed America’s national debt to its current unsustainable level.

The debt crises that follow are only being met with more borrowing and cutting spending for programs of social uplift, while never questioning the obscene, nearly \$1 trillion annual budgets that continue to bloat the Pentagon. National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) budget requests are, year after year, approved by nearly unanimous majorities of our chicken-hearted legislators of both political parties in the dark of night, when the daily news cycle is at hibernation status.

### Chickens Home to Roost

And now, predictably, the chickens (in more than one sense of the word) have come home to roost. Strongly deluded that there is “glory” in war – and with blank-check borrowing and spending on weaponry – America has spawned tens of millions of sick, hungry, homeless, under-employed, under-educated, addicted, psychologically-traumatized and impoverished people, many of whom are conveniently hidden in inner cities that the out-of-touch policymakers never see.

Universal health care, which large majorities of the population desire, is habitually rejected by the powers that be in the medical, pharmaceutical and insurance industries. After all, the politicians who have been financed by such industries have great health insurance and health care themselves. So why would greedy One Percenters want to have their taxes go up to help those whom they have made sick, poor and hungry? (For that matter why should the One Percenters want to pay taxes that support public libraries and parks when they themselves have personal libraries and private playgrounds?)

“Let ‘em eat grass” was the fateful comment made to starving Indians by the thoughtless Minnesota territory Indian Agent who was later found dead with his mouth stuffed full of grass.

But America’s rapidly deteriorating infrastructure can’t and won’t be fixed while bloated and wasteful military budgets go unopposed in Congress. You can’t afford both guns and butter!

If you are seeing cuts to the programs that make life worth living, understand that much of the blame should be placed on the massive Pentagon borrowing and spending that has gone on every year since the massive increases in spending on nuclear weaponry during the administrations Ronald Wilson Reagan.

### Who’s in Charge?

What is the eventual outcome of putting a society’s basic human needs last? Poor mental and physical health, poor educational opportunities, a poorly trained workforce, underemployment, drug use (both illicit and prescription), hopelessness, suicidality, homicidality, addictive behaviors (including gambling), domestic abuse, street gangs,

prostitution, ignorance, malnutrition, desperation, poverty and, inevitably, anger at and a desire to retaliate against a system of government and corporate control that neglects its people and then shows no signs of remorse for having done so.

It shouldn't surprise us that the Occupy Wall Street emerged and then was put down by the powers-that-be.

Are average Americans going to continue to be perpetually sickened and impoverished while blindly cheering our unaffordable #1 Military Superpower status? Are we going to continue to waste scarce resources on bankrupting wars and military occupations worldwide while refusing to make investments at home that would ensure a sustainable economy, a healthy planet and citizens whose physical and mental-health needs are met?

Are the weapons-makers, the gun-runners, the Pentagon, the FBI and the CIA (and the dozens of other intelligence agencies) really just expensive make-work jobs programs that protect the global investments of the obscenely-wealthy war-profiteering, multinational corporations that further impoverish the rest of society? Knowing that the "black box" budgets of the dozens of American intelligence agencies now approximate \$1 trillion a year makes one wonder if our nation has a military or if our military has a nation.

Are we going to continue ignoring the fact that wasteful war-industry jobs cost twice as much to generate and fund as jobs in health care, education, infrastructure repair or green technology? Are we going to continue to allow excessive military spending at the expense of the disappearing middle-class and an expanding lower class?

Are we going to continue fearing the wrath of the 800-pound gorillas of the One Percent that intimidate and threaten us into silence and inaction? Or are we going to courageously organize and band together to refuse to cooperate with the One Percenters?

Is It Too Late?

The military/industrial/congressional (MIC) complex that President Dwight Eisenhower warned us about in his farewell address has increasingly parasitized the U.S. economy since World War II, and it has proven to be disastrous for average Americans.



*President Dwight Eisenhower delivering his farewell address on Jan. 17, 1961.*

The MIC has caused the extinction of many family farms, family businesses and trade unions

starting with Reagan, and it has created the heartless union-busting multinational corporations that yearn to pay slave wages to its workers.

The Complex has been behind the “fouling of the nest” (the poisoned environment) with tens of thousands of lethal, immune system destroying and cancer-causing industrial pollutants, radioactive waste disposal sites and toxic military dumpsites that will continue to foul the food, water, soil and air for generations unless effective programs are instituted.

Unsustainable levels of personal credit-card debt, college loan debt, healthcare debt and home mortgage debt among the lower 99 Percent, who were tempted, by predatory lenders, to imitate what seems to be the norm for the One Percenters, have resulted in an epidemic of home mortgage foreclosures, personal bankruptcies and homelessness.

Although it might already be too late, the lower 99 may finally be waking up and trying to reverse the nation’s descent toward total economic collapse, at which time the One Percenters, with their fortunes intact, will snap up everything they covet at fire sale prices. However, for the nation as a whole, being armed to the teeth and universally feared and hated (because America’s exploitative bullying behavior around the world) is not a sustainable path to global security.

Because of America’s bullying behavior and its misbegotten generations-long over-spending on its weapons systems (that continues to victimize billions of people, including its own citizens), we will soon have nobody interested in rescuing us from our massive indebtedness and our self-imposed, suicidal path towards collapse.

Without a change, America is destined to become a despised pariah state – a national version of that heavily armed dead man in Cleveland – as the U.S. sinks further and further into moral and spiritual depravity.

We Americans have to stop deluding ourselves into thinking that we can spend borrowed money on both guns and butter. America cannot continue to go the route of empty refrigerators and lethal weapons everywhere.

Gary G. Kohls is a peace-and-justice activist and retired mental health physician.

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