

What Eisenhower Got Wrong

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Global Research, January 13, 2011

warisacrime.org 13 January 2011

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

Fifty years ago this Monday, President Dwight Eisenhower gave a [farewell address](#) in which he famously warned of the dangers of influence on our government by the “military industrial complex.” Our current Secretary of War, Robert Gates, has proposed to retire this year and has recommended that his successors stop increasing the military budget. But Eisenhower didn’t just bring this up on his way out the door. It was seven years earlier that he had [remarked](#):

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed 8,000 people.”

But pulling these quotes out of context, as we like to do, misses the reprehensible context of the speeches in which they originated. It would be a similar act of distortion to quote President Barack Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize [acceptance speech](#) and leave out everything but that peaceful opening line,

“Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Distinguished Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, citizens of America, and citizens of the world:”

Obama went on to argue the necessity of war. And that is what Eisenhower did in his farewell address. He argued against unlimited militarization while arguing for something just short of it. He proposed disarmament while suggesting that we’d really better not do it. These lines are less well remembered:

“We face a hostile ideology, global in scope, atheistic in character, ruthless in purpose, and insidious in method. Unhappily, the danger it poses promises to be of indefinite duration.”

How does one dismantle the military industrial complex in the face of a ruthless, atheistic ideology? Of course, Eisenhower did not do so. He refrained from some of the excesses, in both war funding and war lying, of his successors. He dug our country into a pointless war on Vietnam, but not to the extent of his successors. And when his immediate successor resisted the military machine more than Eisenhower had, a single bullet struck him multiple times in Dallas.

If we set aside for a moment the pressing question for all presidents of whether Eisenhower was a devil or a saint, we can appreciate the value of having a president say anything

worthwhile. But a half century later, we should be able to bring ourselves to also recognize what ideally should have been said — and was being said by others.

In the same [speech](#) in which Eisenhower spoke of the theft from those who hunger, he claimed eternal innocence for the United States in foreign affairs. The United States had never been an aggressor; that was the Soviet Union's role. The United States relied on "trust and mutual aid" while the USSR relied on "force: huge armies, subversion, rule of neighbor nations." Why did we have to steal from the hungry in order to build weapons? Eisenhower had the answer:

"The amassing of Soviet power alerted free nations to a new danger of aggression. It compelled them in self-defense to spend unprecedented money and energy for armaments."

Eisenhower blamed the Soviet Union for "aggression in Korea and southeast Asia." We [know](#) that to have constituted a pair of super-destructive [lies](#). The point is not that Eisenhower wasn't relatively responsible, when compared with his predecessors and successors. But he maintained the same set of lies that allowed for the military industrial complex to grow into something today that probably didn't penetrate his worst nightmares.

Fifty years later it has come to look likely that militarized global empire cannot be maintained at a limited level that permits democracy at home. This is an all or nothing endeavor that requires a radical solution. We cannot both live and breathe fear of the evil now-Muslim terrorist ideology and halt nuclear proliferation. We cannot pretend our wars have been defensive and humanitarian while at the same time shutting down bases around the globe. We cannot imagine foreigners to be subhuman beasts and simultaneously pursue disarmament. In 1959, A.J. Muste [said](#):

"I am not impressed . . . with the struggle that goes on periodically between the White House and Congressional committees over whether a balanced budget or national security is of first importance. These are not struggles between pacifists and militarists, people who want or do not want 'genuine negotiation.' And however these controversies come out, the military budget will be of astronomical proportions for 'peacetime'."

Muste cited C. Wright Mills and George F. Kennan in arguing for unilateral disarmament and adoption of a very different approach to the world. A half century later, that idea has less respect than ever, but the dominant idea is taking us off a cliff. The [war machine](#) is stronger than ever, the war propaganda slicker, the dangers heightened. Continuing down this course is not survivable in terms of proliferation or blowback, environmental destruction or loss of democratic representation, or in simple economic terms. This week a congress member proposed a bill to allow his colleagues to come armed to work, on the grounds that they could not safely walk home on Capitol Hill.

Tinkering with a self-destructive system will not save us. We need what Martin Luther King, Jr., whose holiday is also celebrated on Monday, called a revaluation of values. We need to [outgrow the idea](#) that there can be a good or just war any more than there can be a good slavery or a just rape. We need to confront the root of the militaristic ideology that even Eisenhower pushed on us: the [lies](#) about World War II. Yes, Franklin Roosevelt campaigned for office promising to stay out of a war he was already working to maneuver the United States into, and for all the wrong reasons, and he lied about German attacks and plans for

conquest, and he lied about Pearl Harbor.

For a truly painful experience, [read](#) what FDR and others knew. Then [read](#) the endless saga of investigations and coverups.

That FDR pursued very good policies domestically is not altered by what he did abroad. If we are looking for people to model our lives after, they should not be elected officials. They should be people like Martin Luther King, Jr.

[Here](#) is someone doing that.

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