

A Highway to Peace or a Highway to Hell?

The Vast Power of the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex

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In April 1953, newly elected President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a retired five-star Army general who had led the landings on D-Day in France in June 1944, gave his most powerful speech. It would become known as his "[Cross of Iron](#)" address. In it, Ike warned of the cost humanity would pay if Cold War competition led to a world dominated by wars and weaponry that couldn't be reined in. In the immediate aftermath of the death of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, Ike extended an olive branch to the new leaders of that empire. He sought, he said, to put America and the world on a "highway to peace." It was, of course, never to be, as this country's emergent [military-industrial-congressional complex](#) (MICC) chose instead to build a militarized (and highly profitable) highway to hell.

Image: President Dwight D. Eisenhower (National Archives)



Eight years later, in his famous [farewell address](#), a frustrated and alarmed president called out "the military-industrial complex," prophetically warning of its anti-democratic nature and the disastrous rise of misplaced power that it represented. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry, fully engaged in corralling, containing, and constraining it, he concluded, could

save democracy and bolster peaceful methods and goals.

The MICC's response was, of course, to ignore his warning, while waging a savage war on communism in the name of containing it. In the process, [atrocious conflicts](#) would be launched in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as the contagion of war spread. Threatened with the possibility of peace in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the MICC bided its time with operations in Iraq (Desert Storm), [Bosnia](#), and elsewhere, along with the [expansion of NATO](#), until it could launch an unconstrained Global War on Terror in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Those "good times" (filled with lost wars) lasted until 2021 and the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Not to be deterred by the fizzling of the nightmarish war on terror, the MICC seized on a "[new cold war](#)" with [China](#) and Russia, which only surged when, in 2022, Vladimir Putin so disastrously invaded Ukraine (as the U.S. had once invaded Afghanistan and [Iraq](#)). Yet again, Americans were told that they faced implacable foes that could only be met with [overwhelming military power](#) and, of course, the funding that went with it — again in the name of deterrence and containment.

In a way, in 1953 and later in 1961, Ike, too, had been urging Americans to launch a war of containment, only against an internal foe: what he then labeled for the first time "the military-industrial complex." For various reasons, we failed to heed his warnings. As a result, over the last 70 years, it has grown to dominate the federal government as well as American culture in a myriad of ways. Leaving aside [funding](#) where it's beyond dominant, try [movies](#), [TV shows](#), [video games](#), [education](#), [sports](#), you name it. Today, the MICC is remarkably uncontained. Ike's words weren't enough and, sadly, his actions too often conflicted with his vision (as in the CIA's involvement in a [coup in Iran in 1953](#)). So, his worst nightmare did indeed come to pass. In 2023, along with much of the world, America does indeed hang from a cross of iron, hovering closer to the brink of nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Updating Ike's Cross of Iron Speech for Today

Perhaps the most quoted passage in that 1953 speech addressed the true [cost of militarism](#), with Ike putting it in homespun, easily grasped, terms. He started by saying, "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." (An aside: Can you imagine Donald Trump, Joe Biden, or any other recent president challenging Pentagon spending and militarism so brazenly?)

Ike then added:

"This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. 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. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. 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 more than 8,000 people."

He concluded with a harrowing image: "This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

Ike's cost breakdown of guns versus butter, weapons versus civilian goods, got me thinking recently: What would it look like if he could give that speech today? Are we getting more bang for the military megabucks we spend, or less? How much are Americans sacrificing to their wasteful and wanton god of war?

Let's take a closer look. A conservative cost estimate for one of the Air Force's new "heavy" strategic nuclear bombers, the [B-21 Raider](#), is \$750 million. A conservative estimate for a single new fighter plane, in this case the [F-35 Lightning II](#), is \$100 million. A single Navy destroyer, a [Zumwalt-class ship](#), will be anywhere from \$4 to \$8 billion, but let's just stick with the lower figure. Using those weapons, and some quick Internet sleuthing, here's how Ike's passage might read if he stood before us now:

"The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick-veneer and reinforced concrete school in 75 cities. It is five electric power plants, each serving a town with 60,000 inhabitants. It is five fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 150 miles of pavement. We pay for a single fighter plane with more than 12 million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 64,000 people."

(Quick and dirty figures for the calculations above: [\\$10 million](#) per elementary school; \$150 million per power plant [[\\$5,000/kilowatt](#) for 30,000 homes]; [\\$150 million](#) per hospital; [\\$5 million](#) per new mile of road; \$8 per bushel of wheat; \$250,000 per home for four people.)

Grim stats indeed! Admittedly, those are just ballpark figures, but taken together they show that the tradeoff between guns and butter — bombers and jet fighters on the one hand, schools and hospitals on the other — is considerably worse now than in Ike's day. Yet Congress doesn't seem to care, as Pentagon budgets continue to soar irrespective of huge cost overruns and failed audits ([five in a row!](#)), not to speak of failed wars.

Without irony, today's MICC speaks of "investing" in weapons, yet, unlike Ike in 1953, today's generals, the CEOs of the major weapons-making corporations, and members of Congress never bring up the lost opportunity costs of such "investments." Imagine the better schools and hospitals this country could have today, the improved public transportation, more affordable housing, even bushels of wheat, for the cost of those prodigal weapons and the complex that goes with them. And perish the thought of acknowledging in any significant way how so many of those "investments" have failed spectacularly, including the *Zumwalt*-class destroyers and the Navy's Freedom-class littoral combat ships that came to be known in the Pentagon as "[little crappy ships](#)."

Speaking of wasteful warships, Ike was hardly the first person to notice how much they cost or what can be sacrificed in building them. In his prescient book [The War in the Air](#), first published in 1907, [H.G. Wells](#), the famed author who had envisioned an alien invasion of Earth in [The War of the Worlds](#), denounced his own epoch's obsession with ironclad battleships in a passage that eerily anticipated Ike's powerful critique:

The cost of those battleships, Wells wrote, must be measured by:

"The lives of countless men... spent in their service, the splendid genius and patience of thousands of engineers and inventors, wealth and material beyond estimating; to their account we must put stunted and starved lives on land, millions of children sent to toil unduly, innumerable opportunities of fine living undeveloped and lost. Money had to be

found for them at any cost—that was the law of a nation’s existence during that strange time. Surely they were the weirdest, most destructive and wasteful megatheria in the whole history of mechanical invention.”

Little could he imagine our own era’s “wasteful megatheria.” These days, substitute nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles, strategic bombers, aircraft carriers, and similar “modern” weapons for the ironclads of his era and the sentiment rings at least as true as it did then. (Interestingly, all those highly touted ironclads did nothing to avert the disaster of World War I and had little impact on its murderous course or ponderous duration.)

Returning to 1953, Eisenhower didn’t mince words about what the world faced if the iron cross mentality won out: at worst, nuclear war; at best, “a life of perpetual fear and tension; a burden of arms draining the wealth and labor of all peoples; a wasting of strength that defies the American system, or the Soviet system, or any system to achieve true abundance and happiness for the peoples of this earth.”

Ike’s worst-case scenario grows ever more likely today. Recently, [Russia suspended](#) the START treaty, the final nuclear deal still in operation, that oversaw reductions in strategic nuclear weapons. Instead of reductions, Russia, China, and the United States are now pursuing staggering “modernization” programs for their nuclear arsenals, an effort that may cost the American taxpayer [nearly \\$2 trillion](#) over the coming decades (though even such a huge sum matters little if most of us are dead from nuclear war).

In any case, the United States in 2023 clearly reflects Ike’s “cross of iron” scenario. It’s a country that’s become thoroughly militarized and so is slowly wasting away, marked increasingly by [fear](#), [deprivation](#), and [unhappiness](#).

It’s Never Too Late to Change Course

Only Americans, Ike [once said](#), can truly hurt America. Meaning, to put the matter in a more positive context, only we can truly help save America. A vital first step is to put the word “[peace](#)” back in our national vocabulary.

“The peace we seek,” Ike explained 70 years ago, “founded upon a decent trust and cooperative effort among nations, can be fortified, not by weapons of war but by wheat and by cotton, by milk and by wool, by meat and timber and rice. These are words that translate into every language on earth. These are the needs that challenge this world in arms.”

The real needs of humanity haven’t changed since Ike’s time. Whether in 1953 or 2023, more guns won’t serve the cause of peace. They won’t provide succor. They’ll only stunt and starve us, to echo the words of H.G. Wells, while imperiling the lives and futures of our children.

This is no way of life at all, as Ike certainly would have noted, were he alive today.

Which is why the federal budget proposal released by President Biden for 2024 was both so painfully predictable and so immensely disappointing. Calamitously so. Biden’s proposal once again boosts spending on weaponry and war in a Pentagon budget now pegged at [\\$886 billion](#). It will include yet more spending on nuclear weapons and envisions only further perpetual tensions with “near-peer” rivals China and Russia.

This past year, Congress added [\\$45 billion more](#) to that budget than even the president and

the Pentagon requested, putting this country's 2023 Pentagon budget at \$858 billion. Clearly, a trillion-dollar Pentagon budget is in our collective future, perhaps as [early as 2027](#). Perish the thought of how high it could soar, should the U.S. find itself in a shooting war [with China](#) or Russia (as the recent Russian [downing](#) of a U.S. drone in the Black Sea brought to mind). And if that war were to go nuclear...

The Pentagon's soaring war budget broadcast a clear and shocking message to the world. In America's creed, blessed are the warmakers and those martyrs crucified on its cross of iron.

This was hardly the message Ike sought to convey to the world 70 years ago this April. Yet it's the message the MICC conveys with its grossly inflated military budgets and endless saber-rattling.

Yet one thing remains true today: it's never too late to change course, to order an "about-face." Sadly, lacking the wisdom of Dwight D. Eisenhower, such an order won't come from Joe Biden or Donald Trump or Ron DeSantis or any other major candidate for president in 2024. It would have to come from us, collectively. It's time to wise up, America. Together, it's time to find an exit ramp from the highway to hell that we've been on since 1953 and look for the on-ramp to Ike's highway to peace.

And once we're on it, let's push the pedal to the metal and never look back.

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