

Trump Connects the Generals and the Military-Industrial Complex

Top brass are suspiciously cozy with contractors who profit from war. Trump is the first president to point it out.

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Once again, the [whispers of phantoms](#) masquerading as administration officials have attempted to put Donald Trump on the defensive only two months before the fall election. And in typical fashion, the roused president has gone on an immediate rhetorical offensive.

Trump has doubled down on his affirmations towards the U.S. military and the American soldier, while simultaneously confronting the class of generals who command them.

"I'm not saying the military's in love with me—the soldiers are," Trump [said](#) at a Labor Day press conference. "The top people in the Pentagon probably aren't because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy."

This is a dramatic shift in perspective from the man who spent the first two years of his presidency surrounding himself with top brass like Michael Flynn, John Kelly, H.R. McMaster, and James Mattis (along with almost being beguiled into nominating [David Petraeus](#) as Secretary of State). Perhaps Trump learned the hard way that the generals of the forever wars don't measure up to the twentieth-century soldiers he adulated growing up.

For instance, when George Marshall oversaw the deployment of 8.3 million GIs across four continents in World War II, he did so with the assistance of only three other four-star generals. In retirement, Marshall refused to sit on any corporate boards, and passed on multiple lucrative book deals, lest he give the impression that he was profiting from his military record. As he [told](#) one publisher, "he had not spent his life serving the government in order to sell his life story to the *Saturday Evening Post*."

Contrast that to the bloated, top-heavy military establishment of today, where an unprecedented forty-one four-star generals oversee only 1.3 million men and women-at-arms. These men, selected and groomed because of their [safe](#) habits, spend years patting themselves on the back for managing wars-not-won, awaiting the day they can cash in. According to an [analysis](#) by *The Boston Globe*, in the mid-1990s nearly 50% of three- and four-star generals went on to work as consultants or executives for the arms industry. In 2006, at the height of the Iraq War, that number swelled to over 80% of retirees.

The [examples](#) are as endless as America's foreign occupations: former Director of Naval Intelligence Jack Dorsett joined the board of Northrop-Grumman; he was later followed by former Air Force Chief of Staff Mark Welsh; meanwhile, former Vice Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff James Cartwright went to Raytheon; former Chairs of the Joint Chiefs—the highest ranking position in the military—William J. Crowe, John Shalikashvili, Richard Myers, and Joseph Dunford [went on](#) to work for General Dynamics, Boeing, Northrop-Grumman, and Lockheed-Martin, respectively.

General James “Mad Dog” Mattis, in between his forced retirement from the Marine Corps and appointment as Secretary of Defense, [joined](#) the board of General Dynamics where he was paid over a million dollars in salary and benefits. Returning to public life, Mattis then spent two years cajoling President Trump into keeping the U.S. military engaged in places as disparate as Afghanistan, Syria, and Africa. “Sir, we’re doing it to prevent a bomb from going off in Times Square,” Mattis [told](#) his commander-in-chief. Left unsaid was that a strategic withdrawal would also lead to a precipitous decline in Mattis’ future stock options, which he regained after he rejoined General Dynamics following his December 2018 resignation.

That resignation might have been premature, however. It was only a matter of weeks before Trump’s announced withdrawal from Syria, the impetus for Mattis’ departure, was reversed. Hundreds of U.S. soldiers continue to illegally occupy the north-east of the country. That’s in addition to the thousands of Americans still kicking dust in Iraq and Afghanistan, contrary to the president’s “America First” pledge.

And Trump is as guilty as any of his subordinates when it comes to coddling the military-industrial complex, [gushing](#) over billion dollar arms deals and their manufactured jobs numbers. It remains to be seen whether his latest announcement of a [partial withdrawal](#) from Iraq by the end of the month will turn out as phony as the others.

Whether meaningful or empty, Donald Trump’s words remain a significant departure from the norm. He is one of the first prominent figures in living memory—and certainly the first president, ever—to connect the controlling influence of the military-industrial complex to the actions and advice of U.S. generals. For this he has been compared to the man who first coined the term, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, although even Ike never impugned the motivations of his fellow four-stars.

Trump’s language more closely resembles that of Major General Smedley Butler, who at the time of his death was the most decorated marine in U.S. history. “The professional soldiers and sailors don’t want to disarm. No admiral wants to be without a ship. No general wants to be without a command. Both mean men without jobs. They are not for disarmament. They cannot be for limitations of arms,” Butler wrote in his 1935 book *War is a Racket*.

To eliminate this corrupting influence, Butler advocated an egalitarian price control to prevent the arms industry—and their pet generals—from profiting off the blood of American boys. “Let the officers and the directors and the high-powered executives of our armament factories and our steel companies and our munitions makers and our shipbuilders and our airplane builders and the manufacturers of all the other things that provide profit in war time as well as the bankers and the speculators, be conscripted—to get \$30 a month, the same wage as the lads in the trenches get.”

Today that would be the equivalent of \$1,733 a month, the same as a first year private in the army. It's a far cry from the [\\$96 million](#) the CEOs of the Pentagon's top five contractors—all listed above—were collectively paid in 2016.

Let's call it a starting point.

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Featured image: President-elect Trump with retired Marine Corps General James Mattis, who would soon become Secretary of Defense in between stints at General Dynamics. [\(By a katz/Shutterstock\)](#)

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