

Unwarranted Influence, Twenty-First-Century-Style

Not Your Grandfather's Military-Industrial Complex

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Global Research, May 07, 2023

[TomDispatch](#) 4 May 2023

Region: [USA](#)

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

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The military-industrial complex (MIC) that President Dwight D. Eisenhower [warned](#) Americans about more than 60 years ago is still alive and well. In fact, it's consuming many more tax dollars and feeding far larger weapons producers than when Ike raised the alarm about the "unwarranted influence" it wielded in his 1961 farewell address to the nation.

The statistics are stunning. This year's proposed budget for the Pentagon and nuclear weapons work at the Department of Energy is [\\$886 billion](#) — more than twice as much, adjusted for inflation, as at the time of Eisenhower's speech. The Pentagon now consumes [more than half](#) the federal discretionary budget, leaving priorities like public health, environmental protection, job training, and education to compete for what remains. In 2020, Lockheed Martin received \$75 billion in Pentagon contracts, [more than](#) the entire budget of the State Department and the Agency for International Development combined.

This year's [spending](#) just for that company's overpriced, underperforming F-35 combat aircraft equals the full budget of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And as a [new report](#) from the National Priorities Project at the Institute for Policy Studies revealed recently, the average taxpayer spends \$1,087 per year on weapons contractors compared to \$270 for K-12 education and just \$6 for renewable energy.

The list goes on — and on and on. President Eisenhower characterized such tradeoffs in a lesser known [speech](#), "The Chance for Peace," delivered in April 1953, early in his first term, this way: "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. 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..."

How sadly of this moment that is.

New Rationales, New Weaponry

Now, don't be fooled. The current war machine isn't your grandfather's MIC, not by a country mile. It receives far more money and offers far different rationales. It has far more sophisticated tools of influence and significantly different technological aspirations.

Perhaps the first and foremost difference between Eisenhower's era and ours is the sheer size of the major weapons firms. Before the post-Cold War merger boom of the 1990s, there were [dozens](#) of significant defense contractors. Now, there are just five big (no, enormous!) players — Boeing, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon. With so few companies to produce aircraft, armored vehicles, missile systems, and nuclear weapons, the Pentagon has ever more limited leverage in keeping them from overcharging for products that don't perform as advertised. The Big Five alone routinely split more than [\\$150 billion](#) in Pentagon contracts annually, or nearly 20% of the total Pentagon budget. Altogether, more than half of the department's annual spending goes to contractors large and small.

In Eisenhower's day, the Soviet Union, then this country's major adversary, was used to justify an ever larger, ever more permanent arms establishment. Today's "[pacing threat](#)," as the Pentagon calls it, is China, a country with a far larger population, a far more robust economy, and a far more developed technical sector than the Soviet Union ever had. But unlike the USSR, China's primary challenge to the United States is economic, not military.

Yet, as Dan Grazier noted in a December 2022 [report](#) for the Project on Government Oversight, Washington's ever more intense focus on China has been accompanied by significant military threat inflation. While China hawks in Washington wring their hands about that country having more naval vessels than America, Grazier points out that our Navy has far more firepower. Similarly, the active American nuclear weapons stockpile is roughly [nine times](#) as large as China's and the Pentagon budget [three times](#) what Beijing spends on its military, according to the latest figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

But for Pentagon contractors, Washington's ever more intense focus on the prospect of war with China has one overriding benefit: it's fabulous for business. The threat of China's military, real or imagined, continues to be used to justify significant increases in military spending, especially on the next generation of high-tech systems ranging from hypersonic missiles to robotic weapons and artificial intelligence. The history of such potentially dysfunctional high-tech systems, from President Ronald Reagan's "[Star Wars](#)" missile defense system to the F-35, does not bode well, however, for the cost or performance of emerging military technologies.

No matter, count on one thing: tens, if not hundreds, of billions of dollars will undoubtedly go into developing them anyway. And remember that they are dangerous and not just to any enemy. As Michael Klare pointed out in an Arms Control Association [report](#): "AI-enabled systems may fail in unpredictable ways, causing unintended human slaughter or an uncontrolled escalation crisis."

Arsenal of Influence

Despite a seemingly [never-ending list](#) of overpriced, underperforming weapons systems developed for a Pentagon that's the only federal agency never to pass an [audit](#), the MIC has

an arsenal of influence propelling it ever closer to a trillion-dollar annual budget. In short, it's bilking more money from taxpayers than ever before and just about everyone — from lobbyists galore to countless political campaigns, think tanks beyond number to Hollywood — is in on it.

And keep in mind that the dominance of a handful of mega-firms in weapons production means that each of the top players has more money to spread around in lobbying and campaign contributions. They also have more facilities and employees to point to, often in politically key states, when persuading members of Congress to vote for — Yes!– even more money for their weaponry of choice.

The arms industry as a whole has [donated](#) more than \$83 million to political candidates in the past two election cycles, with Lockheed Martin leading the pack with \$9.1 million in contributions, followed by Raytheon at \$8 million, and Northrop Grumman at \$7.7 million. Those funds, you won't be surprised to learn, are heavily concentrated among members of the House and Senate armed services committees and defense appropriations subcommittees. For example, as Taylor Giorno of OpenSecrets, a group that tracks campaign and lobbying expenditures, has [found](#), "The 58 members of the House Armed Services Committee reported receiving an average of \$79,588 from the defense sector during the 2022 election cycle, three times the average \$26,213 other representatives reported through the same period."

Lobbying expenditures by all the denizens of the MIC are even higher — more than [\\$247 million](#) in the last two election cycles. Such funds are used to employ [820 lobbyists](#), or more than one for every member of Congress. And mind you, more than two-thirds of those lobbyists had swirled through Washington's infamous revolving door from jobs at the Pentagon or in Congress to lobby for the arms industry. Their contacts in government and knowledge of arcane acquisition procedures help ensure that the money keeps flowing for more guns, tanks, ships and missiles. Just last month, the office of Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) [reported](#) that nearly 700 former high-ranking government officials, including former generals and admirals, now work for defense contractors. While a few of them are corporate board members or highly paid executives, 91% of them became Pentagon lobbyists, according to the report.

And that feverishly spinning revolving door provides current members of Congress, their staff, and Pentagon personnel with a powerful incentive to play nice with those giant contractors while still in their government roles. After all, a lucrative lobbying career awaits once they leave government service.

Nor is it just K Street lobbying jobs those weapons-making corporations are offering. They're also spreading jobs to nearly every Main Street in America. The poster child for such jobs as a selling point for an otherwise questionable weapons system is Lockheed Martin's F-35. It may never be fully ready for combat thanks to countless design flaws, including [more than 800](#) unresolved defects detected by the Pentagon's independent testing office. But the company [insists](#) that its program produces no less than 298,000 jobs in 48 states, even if the actual total is [less than half](#) of that.

In reality — though you'd never know this in today's Washington — the weapons sector is a declining industry when it comes to job creation, even if it does absorb near-record levels of government funding. According to [statistics](#) gathered by the National Defense Industrial

Association, there are currently one million direct jobs in arms manufacturing compared to 3.2 million in the 1980s.

Outsourcing, automation, and the production of fewer units of more complex systems have skewed the workforce toward better-paying engineering jobs and away from production work, a shift that has come at a high price. The vacuuming up of engineering and scientific talent by weapons makers means fewer skilled people are available to address urgent problems like public health and the climate crisis. Meanwhile, it's estimated that [spending](#) on education, green energy, health care, or infrastructure could produce 40% to 100% more jobs than Pentagon spending does.

Shaping the Elite Narrative: The Military-Industrial Complex and Think Tanks

One of the MIC's most powerful tools is its ability to shape elite discussions on national security issues by funding foreign policy think tanks, along with affiliated analysts who are all too often the experts of choice when it comes to media coverage on issues of war and peace. A forthcoming Quincy Institute brief reveals that more than 75% of the top foreign-policy think tanks in the United States are at least partially funded by defense contractors. Some, like the Center for a New American Security and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, receive millions of dollars every year from such contractors and then [publish](#) articles and reports that are largely supportive of defense-industry funding.

Some such think tanks even offer support for weapons made by their funders without disclosing those glaring conflicts of interest. For example, an American Enterprise Institute (AEI) scholar's [critique](#) of this year's near-historically high Pentagon budget request, which, she claimed, was "well below inflation," also included support for increased funding for a number of weapons systems like the Long Range Anti-Ship Missile, the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile, the B-21 bomber, and the Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile.

What's not mentioned in the piece? The companies that build those weapons, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, have been AEI funders. Although that institute is a "dark money" think tank that doesn't publicly disclose its funders, at an [event](#) last year, a staffer let slip that the organization receives money from both of those contractors.

Unfortunately, mainstream media outlets disproportionately rely on commentary from experts at just such think tanks. That forthcoming Quincy Institute report, for example, found that they were more than four times as likely as those without MIC funding to be cited in *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* articles about the Ukraine War. In short, when you see a think-tank expert quoted on questions of war and peace, odds are his or her employer receives money from the war machine.

What's more, such think tanks have their own version of a feverishly spinning revolving door, earning them the moniker "[holding tanks](#)" for future government officials. The Center for a New American Security, for example, [receives](#) millions of dollars from defense contractors and the Pentagon every year and has [boasted](#) that a number of its experts and alumni joined the Biden administration, including high-ranking political appointees at the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Shaping the Public Narrative: The Military-Entertainment Complex

Top Gun: Maverick was a certified blockbuster, wowing audiences that ultimately gave that

action film an astounding [99%](#) score on Rotten Tomatoes — and such popular acclaim helped earn the movie a Best Picture Oscar nomination. It was also a resounding success for the Pentagon, which worked closely with the filmmakers and provided, “equipment — including jets and aircraft carriers — personnel and technical expertise,” and even had the opportunity to make script revisions, according to the [Washington Post](#). Defense contractors were similarly a pivotal part of that movie’s success. In fact, the CEO of Lockheed Martin [boasted](#) that his firm “partnered with *Top Gun*’s producers to bring cutting-edge, future forward technology to the big screen.”

While *Top Gun: Maverick* might have been the most successful recent product of the military-entertainment complex, it’s just the latest installment in a long history of Hollywood spreading military propaganda. “The Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency have exercised direct editorial control over more than 2,500 films and television shows,” [according](#) to Professor Roger Stahl, who researches propaganda and state violence at the [University of Georgia](#).

“The result is an entertainment culture rigged to produce relatively few antiwar movies and dozens of blockbusters that glorify the military,” [explained](#) journalist David Sirota, who has [repeatedly called](#) attention to the perils of the military-entertainment complex. “And save for filmmakers’ obligatory thank you to the Pentagon in the credits,” [argued](#) Sirota, “audiences are rarely aware that they may be watching government-subsidized propaganda.”

What Next for the MIC?

More than 60 years after Eisenhower identified the problem and gave it a name, the military-industrial complex continues to use its unprecedented influence to corrupt budget and policy processes, starve funding for non-military solutions to security problems, and ensure that war is the ever more likely “solution” to this country’s problems. The question is: What can be done to reduce its power over our lives, our livelihoods, and ultimately, the future of the planet?

Countering the modern-day military-industrial complex would mean dislodging each of the major pillars undergirding its power and influence. That would involve campaign-finance reform; curbing the revolving door between the weapons industry and government; shedding more light on its funding of political campaigns, think tanks, and Hollywood; and prioritizing investments in the jobs of the future in green technology and public health instead of piling up ever more weapons systems. Most important of all, perhaps, a broad-based public education campaign is needed to promote more realistic views of the challenge posed by China and to counter the current climate of fear that serves the interests of the Pentagon and the giant weapons contractors at the expense of the safety and security of the rest of us.

That, of course, would be no small undertaking, but the alternative — an ever-spiraling arms race that could spark a world-ending conflict or prevent us from addressing existential threats like climate change and pandemics — is simply unacceptable.

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