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The Permanent Militarization of America

By AARON B. O'CONNELL

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IN 1961, President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) left office [warning](#) of the growing power of the military-industrial complex in American life. Most people know the term the president popularized, but few remember his argument.

In his farewell address, Eisenhower called for a better equilibrium between military and domestic affairs in our economy, politics and culture. He worried that the defense industry's search for profits would warp foreign policy and, conversely, that too much state control of the private sector would cause economic stagnation. He warned that unending preparations for war were incongruous with the nation's history. He cautioned that war and warmaking took up too large a proportion of national life, with grave ramifications for our spiritual health.

The military-industrial complex has not emerged in quite the way Eisenhower envisioned. The United States spends an enormous sum on defense — over \$700 billion last year, about half of all military spending in the world — but in terms of our total economy, it has steadily declined to less than 5 percent of gross domestic product from 14 percent in 1953. Defense-related research has not produced an ossified garrison state; in fact, it has yielded a host of beneficial technologies, from the Internet to civilian nuclear power to GPS navigation. The United States

has an enormous armaments industry, but it has not hampered employment and economic growth. In fact, Congress's favorite argument against reducing defense spending is the job loss such cuts would entail.

Nor has the private sector infected foreign policy in the way that Eisenhower warned. Foreign policy has become increasingly reliant on military solutions since World War II, but we are a long way from the Marines' repeated occupations of Haiti, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic in the early 20th century, when commercial interests influenced military action. Of all the criticisms of the 2003 Iraq war, the idea that it was done to somehow magically decrease the cost of oil is the least credible. Though it's true that mercenaries and contractors have exploited the wars of the past decade, hard decisions about the use of military force are made today much as they were in Eisenhower's day: by the president, advised by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council, and then more or less rubber-stamped by Congress. Corporations do not get a vote, at least not yet.

But Eisenhower's least heeded warning — concerning the spiritual effects of permanent preparations for war — is more important now than ever. Our culture has militarized considerably since Eisenhower's era, and civilians, not the armed services, have been the principal cause. From lawmakers' constant use of "support our troops" to justify defense spending, to TV programs and video games like "NCIS," "Homeland" and "Call of Duty," to NBC's shameful and unreal reality [show](#) "Stars Earn Stripes," Americans are subjected to a daily diet of stories that valorize the military while the storytellers pursue their own opportunistic political and commercial agendas. Of course, veterans should be thanked for serving their country, as should police officers, emergency workers and teachers. But no institution — particularly one financed by the taxpayers — should be immune from thoughtful criticism.

Like all institutions, the military works to enhance its public image, but this is just one element of militarization. Most of the political discourse on military matters comes from civilians, who are more vocal about "supporting our troops" than the troops themselves. It doesn't help that there are fewer veterans in Congress today than at any previous point since World War II. Those who have served are less likely to offer unvarnished praise for the military, for it, like all institutions, has its own frustrations and failings. But for non-veterans — including about four-fifths of all members of Congress — there is only unequivocal, unhesitating adulation. The political costs of anything else are just too high.

For proof of this phenomenon, one need look no further than the continuing furor over sequestration — the automatic cuts, evenly divided between Pentagon and nonsecurity spending,

that will go into effect in January if a deal on the debt and deficits isn't reached. As Bob Woodward's latest book reveals, the Obama administration devised the measure last year to include across-the-board defense cuts because it believed that slashing defense was so unthinkable that it would make compromise inevitable.

But after a grand budget deal collapsed, in large part because of resistance from House Republicans, both parties reframed sequestration as an attack on the troops (even though it has provisions that would protect military pay). The fact that sequestration would also devastate education, health and programs for children has not had the same impact.

Eisenhower understood the trade-offs between guns and butter. "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," he warned in 1953, early in his presidency. "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 50 miles of concrete highway. 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 also knew that Congress was a big part of the problem. (In earlier drafts, he referred to the "military-industrial-Congressional" complex, but decided against alienating the legislature in his last days in office.) Today, there are just a select few in public life who are willing to question the military or its spending, and those who do — from the libertarian Ron Paul to the leftist Dennis J. Kucinich — are dismissed as unrealistic.

The fact that both President Obama and Mitt Romney are calling for increases to the defense budget (in the latter case, above what the military has asked for) is further proof that the military is the true "third rail" of American politics. In this strange universe where those without military credentials can't endorse defense cuts, it took a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Adm. Mike Mullen, to make the obvious point that the nation's ballooning debt was the biggest threat to national security.

Uncritical support of all things martial is quickly becoming the new normal for our youth. Hardly any of my students at the Naval Academy remember a time when their nation wasn't at war. Almost all think it ordinary to hear of drone strikes in Yemen or Taliban attacks in Afghanistan. The recent revelation of counterterrorism bases in Africa elicits no surprise in them, nor do the military ceremonies that are now regular features at sporting events. That which is left

unexamined eventually becomes invisible, and as a result, few Americans today are giving sufficient consideration to the full range of violent activities the government undertakes in their names.

Were Eisenhower alive, he'd be aghast at our debt, deficits and still expanding military-industrial complex. And he would certainly be critical of the "insidious penetration of our minds" by video game companies and television networks, the news media and the partisan pundits. With so little knowledge of what Eisenhower called the "lingering sadness of war" and the "certain agony of the battlefield," they have done as much as anyone to turn the hard work of national security into the crass business of politics and entertainment.