

Militarism: A Way of Life

by Michael Fitzgerald

It's tempting to believe that a change in which political party is in power could bring about a major change in U.S. foreign policy. But it isn't really so. The problem isn't in the White House or Congress; it's structural, built into our economy. The fact is, there are just too many people in the United States who are dependent on war for their livelihoods. I was once one of them: my father helped kill children in Vietnam in order to feed his own kids.

Being from working-class Boston, Massachusetts, my father was a registered Democrat. And Democrats can be just as hawkish—often more so—than Republicans. My father wanted to nuke Vietnam.

To be considered “electable” Democrats have to appease the large number of voters who depend on war for a living. Some of the most pro-war presidents have been Democrats. Woodrow Wilson presided over wholesale imprisonment of citizens who opposed U.S. entry into a war that he had solemnly promised to keep Americans out of. Harry S. Truman made the decision—many say unnecessary—to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. John F. Kennedy essentially won the 1960 election because he “out hawked” Richard Nixon. And Lyndon B. Johnson—who beat Barry Goldwater by labeling him a “warmonger”—turned out to be hawkish himself.

Or take Dwight D. Eisenhower: he was a career military man, not to mention the supreme allied commander of the European theater during World War II. You would expect him to be in favor of handouts to the military. Yet he made several valiant attempts to rein in bloated military budgets. For an army commander and a Republican he had said some pretty remarkable things. He opposed Truman's dropping “the big one” on Japan.¹ In his 1961 farewell speech he warned of what he termed the *military-industrial complex*, adding, “The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power [by this unseen force] exists and will persist.”² Who would know better than the outgoing president and former five-star general about the dangers of an “iron triangle” of defense contractors, politicians, and the military?

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I was a child living in Boston the day Eisenhower turned the presidency over to Kennedy. There was a grand, triumphant celebration in the city because Kennedy was a native son. My parents, who shared his middle name, were particularly thrilled.

My mother and father were both born in Boston during the Great Depression. Official unemployment hit 25 percent in 1933, the year my mother was born.³ My father was from an Irish-American family of six children, all boys. There is no way to adequately express the punishment poverty laid upon his family. During the worst years of the Depression the younger boys, including my father, were placed in an orphanage because my grandparents simply couldn't support them. After a time things improved for my grandfather and the younger boys were retrieved; the older ones had already joined the military to escape the grinding poverty.

The sting of the Depression would affect my parents all their lives. My father parroted the conventional wisdom that World War II was “the only thing that could have gotten the country out of the Depression.” The war turned out to be the ultimate jobs program. The results were swell: not only did it get the U.S. economy revved up, it got all the uneducated, unemployed, young men off the streets, put them to work (as cannon fodder), and tamed labor unrest all at the same time.⁴

With the war's dénouement at hand, U.S. industrialists feared the return of the Depression. In 1944 Charles E. Wilson, president of General Electric and vice-chair of the War Production Board, told the Army Ordnance Association the answer to economic instability was “a permanent war economy.”⁵ If anyone ever needed proof that imperialism and war are the end results of capitalism run amok, Wilson's speech would be exhibit A.

Soon Wilson and his cronies got their wish. In 1946 George F. Kennan, American *charge d'affairs* to Moscow, cabled a telegram to President Truman painting the Soviet Union as evil incarnate. The telegram was published a year later in *Foreign Affairs* and the article helped stir elite opinion against our former allies, the Soviets. Less than a year later Congress passed the National Security Act, the bill that turned Franklin D. Roosevelt's welfare state into Truman's warfare state.⁶

That same year my father joined the Navy at age seventeen and was assigned to a squadron that included his eldest brother. My father, too, became a career military man, retiring as a chief petty officer after twenty-nine years. Then he worked another ten years for the Navy as a civilian.

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I am a beneficiary of Charles Wilson's vision of a permanent war economy. My first eight years were spent in "the projects" while my father was away on sea duty most of the time. The neighborhood was dangerous and my mother was anxious to get herself and her four kids out. We finally got transferred to sunny California where, courtesy of the U.S. Navy, the government put a roof over our heads, food on our table, and a car in our garage.

There are millions of Americans whose livelihoods depend on the permanent war economy. You rarely hear it mentioned but there is a substantial militarist class in the United States—people who make their living preparing for war. This group consists not only of military personnel but people who work for companies like General Electric (the nation's eleventh-largest defense contractor in 2002 and owner of NBC and media conglomerate Vivendi-Universal⁷), Lockheed-Martin, Boeing, Honeywell, Raytheon, TRW, Exxon, Bechtel, and even the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.⁸ In his 1961 farewell speech Eisenhower estimated there were about 3.5 million people employed by the defense establishment, not including military personnel.⁹ By 1988, aided by Ronald Reagan's evil-empire rhetoric, their numbers had doubled.¹⁰ These folks quickly became alarmed and angry when the Justice Department began conducting a large-scale investigation into widespread corruption in the Pentagon and the defense industry.¹¹

My family bid farewell to rusty old Roxbury the same year Eisenhower gave his farewell speech. I joined the burgeoning California teen culture and became a Beach Boys fan. My new friends and I hadn't a clue that the carefree lives and good times the brothers Wilson celebrated in song were courtesy of the permanent war economy.¹² In fact, Los Angeles and the suburban lifestyle the Beach Boys sang about was built on the aerospace industry. The nucleus of the Beach Boys consisted of three teenage brothers—Brian, Dennis, and Carl Wilson. Their father, Murry Wilson, made airplane parts for Boeing bombers.¹³ During the war years aircraft manufacturing had become the largest industry in the United States and it still is.¹⁴ As of 2002 the top three defense contractors were Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman.¹⁵

My own father's connection with death and destruction was a little more overt: he loaded rockets, bombs, and missiles onto jet fighters aboard the frantic carrier deck of the U.S.S. *Oriskany*, just off the coast of Vietnam. My dad—a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat—was completely gung ho. He couldn't understand why President Johnson didn't just "drop the big one" and get it over with.

Members of the militarist class *have* to be gung ho—otherwise they might wind up facing the fact that to feed their own kids they must kill someone else's. It helps if the enemy looks different or can be seen as subhuman. "We had to dehumanize our victims before we did the things we did," said Stan Goff, former master sergeant in the U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam. "We knew deep down that what we were doing was wrong. So they became dinks or gooks, just like Iraqis are now being transformed into 'rag-heads.'"¹⁶

In 1965 when Johnson was commencing escalation I was in seventh grade. "Why are we in Vietnam?" I heard one kid ask. "Because they *asked* us to help them," another glibly replied. It sounded reasonable at the time. The Vietnam War put clothes on my back and food on the table. By 1970, nearing the apex of Nixon's bombing campaign, which he disingenuously called "Vietnamization," my father was making a killing—literally and figuratively—drawing hazardous-duty pay. And it *was* hazardous; a fighter plane once ran over his heel. When he came home I was wearing long hair and bellbottom jeans. My father saw this as a betrayal, and maybe it was. I didn't realize then that having long hair was an anti-war statement.

Thirty-five years later I live in the same town—Jacksonville, Florida—a town built largely with defense dollars. Our most prominent congressional representatives are praised for their dedication to keeping bases open and military budgets as high as possible. *BRAC* (base realignment and closure) is a four-letter word here.

After the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 things really started looking bleak for the local economy. Nationwide, nearly seven million people—approximately 6 percent of the U.S. labor force, whose jobs depended on defense spending—were suddenly faced with an uncertain future.¹⁷ The bogeyman was gone. "I'm running out of villains," quipped Colin Powell, then chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "I'm down to Castro and Kim Il-Sung."¹⁸ Luckily another credible threat would present itself in time to put the next generation of suburban kids through college.

The military-industrial establishment hijacked the theories of British economist John Maynard Keynes and misapplied them. In the 1930s, while Marxists pointed to the Great Depression as a sign that capitalism was going down the tubes, Keynes argued that recessions are part of a natural “business cycle” and could be managed. In his 1936 *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* he addressed the problem of the Depression. Keynes pointed out that, rather than balancing the budget every year, government deficit spending could ameliorate capitalism’s typical boom-bust cycles by keeping jobs available. Keynes’s theories became the foundation for President Roosevelt’s New Deal and the basis of economic policymaking worldwide for decades.¹⁹

Keynes’ theories were even adopted by militarists—but with a twist: whereas Roosevelt’s work programs were designed to benefit the general population directly, military Keynesianism turned defense contractors into middlemen, administering government funds privately. It became a bonanza for defense industries, a veritable orgy at the trough. True, it does create jobs—just the wrong kind of jobs.

War or the threat of war is the ultimate economic stimulus. It’s capitalism on steroids. Prolonged use creates unprecedented growth, but the upside isn’t worth the risks. The steroids metaphor is especially apt—side effects include euphoria, confusion, pathological anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, and even violent, criminal behavior²⁰—and users can easily become addicted. Let’s face it: we’re addicted to the money.

Somehow this doesn’t seem like what Keynes had in mind. He never suggested that government go \$7 trillion in debt, mostly for the benefit of war profiteers. If the economy needs to be goosed every once in a while, shouldn’t the government support *peace-time* industries along the lines of education, healthcare, daycare, or mass transit?

Truman was no match for the militarists in the administration he inherited from Roosevelt. Ultimately, says political science professor Michael Hogan, Truman “failed to assert his authority” over them. By going around the president and directly lobbying Congress, Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal (a former Wall Street investment banker) and his iron-triangle cronies successfully sandbagged Truman’s attempts to rein them in. The party line was that the war wasn’t really over yet and the evil Russians were turning on us—despite the fact that reliable intelligence estimates indicated no hostile actions from the Russians.²¹

Despite the Cold War rhetoric, the economic-stimulus factor, recognized by General Electric’s Wilson and his cohorts, was never far from the surface. It was spelled out in a 1950 National Security Council document, *NSC 68*, drafted by Paul Nitze, head of policy planning for the State Department. Like Forrestal, Nitze too was a former investment banker at Dillon, Read, and Company. Deep in the document is a line stating that without the expansion of military spending the United States would face “a decline in economic activity of serious proportions.”²²

As they say in military parlance: there it is. Without more war another depression would be upon us. Or put another way, we must continue to inflict massive death and destruction *somewhere* in the world in order to avoid disruptions in retail spending at home—the whole U.S. economy depends on it. *NSC 68* threatened to turn the United States into a “garrison state,” Hogan adds, “a society dominated by military institutions, a military economy, and a military mentality.”²³

In 1963 Johnson faced a similar situation to Truman’s, but he apparently didn’t bother resisting. At a December meeting with the Joint Chiefs he reportedly pleaded, “Just get me elected and then you can have your war.”²⁴ But he told confidants that Vietnam wasn’t worth fighting for and was “just the biggest damn mess I ever saw.” Both Truman and Johnson, facing elections, knew the vast political clout Pentagon lobbyists wielded on Capitol Hill. Johnson said privately that he feared impeachment if he pulled out of Vietnam.²⁵

Much has been made of the notion—particularly in Oliver Stone’s controversial 1991 film *JFK*—that the military-industrial cabal killed Kennedy because he was planning to pull the plug on its gravy train.²⁶ But it didn’t need to kill Truman or Johnson to get what it wanted: continuous war.

In his farewell address, Eisenhower echoed the sentiments of another outgoing president and former army general 165 years earlier. In his farewell address, George Washington said Americans should “avoid the necessity of those overgrown military estab-

lishments, which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty.”²⁷

It’s no wonder Washington and his compatriots felt a standing army during peacetime posed a threat to democracy. The idea of having lots of professional military personnel looking for ways to justify their existence is truly scary. “A standing army in time of peace is an evil,” wrote Robert Yates, a New York judge and delegate to the federal convention, in the *New York Journal* in 1787. “The nations around us, sir, are already enslaved. . . . By means of their large standing armies they have lost every one of their liberties.”²⁸ History proves Yates correct that creating a class of people dependent on the defense payroll erodes liberties at home. Jingoism, groupthink, and even vigilantism become infectious. Mussolini and Hitler both capitalized on this reaction.

William D. Hartung, director of the Arms Trade Research Center, part of the World Policy Institute, advises in his February 14, 2003, *Fourth Freedom Forum* article “The Hidden Costs of War” that, at the very least, jingoism undermines U.S. diplomacy:

One of the greatest potential costs of relying on war and preparations for war as a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy is the danger of distorting the U.S. role in the world from that of a vibrant democracy that is ready to defend itself and its allies when necessary, to that of a garrison state that uses force to get its way on a wide range of issues that have little to do with self-defense.²⁹

Or, as Dan Briody put it in his 2003 book *The Iron Triangle*, the result is an American juggernaut “trolling the planet in search of enemies.”³⁰

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Benito Mussolini said *fascism* wasn’t the correct term for his blend of corporate ownership and government muscle; “it should more properly be called ‘corporatism,’ since it is the merger of state and corporate power.”³¹ The blueprint for the military-industrial complex didn’t originate in fascist Italy, however. It began in England prior to World War I with the government seizing control of the country’s oil industry.

Corporate socialism in the United States began with the development of radio. The Wilson administration effectively nationalized the electronics industry by sponsoring a cartel, Radio Corporation of America (RCA), privately owned by four well-connected corporations: AT&T, Westinghouse, United Fruit, and General Electric. The government was more than happy to dole out research dollars, since radio was considered too vital to national security to allow German companies to surpass us in its development.³² This same government-corporate alliance was extended to the oil companies—also for national security reasons—since oil had long been considered a primary defense resource (you can’t sail destroyers or fly planes without fuel).³³ After World War II the national security rationale was extended to hundreds of companies in what Eisenhower called the *military-industrial complex*. The bottom line is the public gets to fund these projects while corporations get to keep all of the profits.³⁴

Some call this the New Economy. We’ve had socialized radio, socialized automobiles, socialized computers, socialized hamburgers, even socialized football—but *not* socialized medicine. It’s the biggest swindle of all time. Companies don’t even bother with the national-security angle anymore. They cite “job creation.”

But fear is still the great lubricant of the wallet: bogeymen appear on the horizon; taxpayers throw magic money to hold them at bay. The intermediary is a defense contractor with a wheelbarrow and a shovel. Most of the time threats do the trick, but every once in a while a real war is necessary to justify the fat handouts. The Bush administration *had* to come up with the weapons-of-mass-destruction argument because it needed a credible threat in order to attack Iraq. Liberating that country and bringing democracy to the Middle East were mere afterthoughts.

The militarists will make the “War on Terror” last as long as they can. Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War effectively extended World War II by another forty-odd years and put trillions of dollars into defense industry coffers—not to mention putting hundreds of thousands of military brats like me through college. The current crop of defense contractors is gambling that the War on Terror will last at least as long.

As of 2002 there were more than seven million people dependent on the U.S. war machine for their livelihoods—certainly enough to swing an election.³⁵ Then there are probably at least as many people in the retail, real-estate, automobile, and service industries in military and defense regions whose paychecks indirectly depend on the influx of defense spending. War is good for

their wallets.

Military, Military-related, and Defense-related Personnel, September 2000

Military industry	2,240,000
Active military	1,370,918
Civilian DoD employees	687,064
Military retirees	1,708,632
Military reserves	1,263,953
Other	52,018
TOTAL	7,322,585

Source: Center for Defense Information *Military Almanac*, 2001–2002

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In the 2004 presidential election, voters basically have had a choice of two pro-war candidates. Democrats declared John Kerry *electable*—which is a trope, a figure of speech, a code word that in fact means he’s “strong on defense”—in other words, he isn’t the sort of person who’d cut the military budget and, if anything, is the sort who’d probably expand it—whether from the Senate or the White House. That’s what it takes to get the votes of those millions of people who depend on war for a living.

And even among those not directly involved in the war industry, there are still plenty who feel war is good for the economy. They forget that the economy was in pretty good shape during the 1990s *after* the Soviet Union disintegrated and cutbacks in military spending were being implemented. When the Cold War ended Americans began talking of a “peace dividend” that would free up government funding for domestic spending.³⁶

The militarists, of course, didn’t regard a peace dividend as encouraging. That’s why they came up with the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and their war in Iraq and why the right-wing media machine geared up to get rid of Bill Clinton. Despite authorizing invasions in Iraq, Sudan, and Kosovo, Clinton’s military muscle wasn’t pumping out enough money to suit them. What’s more, Clinton didn’t buy the PNAC’s war in Iraq when it was proposed to him in 1997.³⁷

Hard-core militarists *like* a bad economy. Poverty and insecurity lead to more recruits, which enlarges militarists’ numbers and electoral clout. There really is a “poverty draft.” My father and all five of his brothers joined up to escape the slums of Roxbury. The military was the only job security they’d ever known. “It was a guaranteed paycheck twice a month,” Specialist Edward Platt of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, told the *New York Times* in November 2003. “There’s not that kind of guarantee anywhere these days.” Platt, who enlisted right out of high school, left one of his legs in Iraq.³⁸

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There are basically two schools of Western imperialism: one that seeks to dominate the world through global commerce and economic power (the internationalists) and another, cruder clique (the expansionists) that expects to go wherever it pleases with both barrels loaded and seize whatever it likes—for example, Iraq’s oil reserves and its treasury.

British economist John Hobson noted the difference between the two schools in 1902. Hobson explained that direct military imperialism is largely a losing proposition that costs more than it gains. However, he noted, it does benefit a few “powerful and well placed groups [such as] ship builders, international bankers, investors, and arms merchants”—those elites whom Eisenhower, twenty years after Hobson’s death, described as making up the military-industrial complex.³⁹

The PNAC’s advocacy of military muscle had gone out of fashion during the Clinton administration, which preferred to sell its occasional military adventures couched in “humanitarian” rhetoric. Globalism was the ticket during the Clinton years. It took several years and a shady election, but the militarists finally got their open-ended war.

No matter who is inaugurated president in January 2005, the war will remain. These things are *supposed* to be quagmires. The longer they last the more steroids for the economy. The Vietnam conflict lasted through *five* administrations. Ultimately, an esti-

mated three to four million Southeast Asians were killed, along with 58,000 Americans.⁴⁰ But a lot of money was made and we stayed off who knows how many recessions.

The fact is both the Republican and Democratic parties are subject to the same economic and electoral pressures. Presidents don't get reelected during recessions ("It's the economy, stupid"), so they have to prod the beast somehow. Most Americans care more about keeping their jobs than about foreigners losing their lives. But war doesn't solve the economic problem; it merely defers it. It's like paying bills with a credit card; we're just making a bad situation worse. Most presidents don't mind creating a mess for the next guy to clean up. But the Truman, Johnson, Reagan, and Bush II administrations appear to have been vying for some kind of record.⁴¹

Source: Center for Defense Information *Military Almanac*, 2001–2002 (updated to 2004). Adjusted to 2002 dollars.

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There's no way the United States can continue to spend this kind of money on defense and keep its domestic commitments.. In the long view it would have been smarter to rebuild the domestic economy—as was attempted in the 1990s—and tough it out through the inevitable recessions. But greed never takes a long-term view.

Eisenhower was certainly no saint. He authorized covert attacks in Southeast Asia, Iran, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Cuba and sent U.S. troops into Lebanon in 1958.⁴² But these adventures seem tame compared to what has come since.

Unlike today's neoconservatives—who actually have more in common with militarist Democrats such as Wilson and Truman—Eisenhower was a true conservative who believed in less government, a smaller military apparatus, and a balanced budget. He took the long view that runaway military spending would ultimately weaken the economy and that a strong domestic economy was the best engine with which to lead, or dominate, the world.⁴³ In that sense, Eisenhower was more a globalist than a militarist.

Having a career military man like Eisenhower as president should have been a scary proposition, but it just goes to show that you never can tell; sometimes the lesser of two evils turns out to be the greater evil. And once in awhile the military person turns out to be the most forthright. Eisenhower may have been the only president to blow the whistle on the great American swindle. Perhaps he said it best in an April 1953 speech: "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."⁴⁴

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The following footnotes weren't published in the print version appearing on pages 26-31 of the November/December 2004 Humanist.

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