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APSA Discussion on the Military-Industrial Complex

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Early this year, Cato hosted [a half-day conference to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Dwight David Eisenhower's farewell address](#)^[3], commonly known as the military-industrial complex speech. I also spoke on this issue at Gettysburg College, where Eisenhower retired and wrote his memoirs, and I offered my thoughts on the significance of the speech in a [review of James Ledbetter's *Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military Industrial Complex*](#).^[4]

This is such a rich topic that Ben Friedman and I decided to host [an encore presentation at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting in Seattle](#)^[5]. The panel will be held on Thursday, September 1st, at 2 pm, in Hyatt Portland AB (don't ask me what that means. Consult the conference program for more details). In addition to me and Ben, the panel features UT's Eugene Gholz, who also spoke at Cato in January, Andrew Ross from the University of New Mexico, Notre Dame's Michael Desch, and William Ruger from Texas State University (and the co-author, with Jason Sorens, of [Freedom in the 50 States: An Index of Personal and Economic Freedom](#)^[6]).

I plan to focus my remarks on Eisenhower's particular perspective on military spending and government spending.

When he warned of the military-industrial complex in January 1961, he didn't question the need for an enormously strong – and quite expensive – military. He genuinely believed that most such spending was essential to deterring and eventually defeating the Soviet Union.

But were he alive today, I think Ike would have been most disappointed, though perhaps not surprised, that the United States maintains a massive military more than 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet empire. Indeed, in real, inflation-adjusted dollars, the United States in 2011 will spend more on national security, broadly defined, than at any time since World War II. More than Truman spent during the Korean war; more than Johnson and Nixon spent during

Vietnam. More, even, than Ronald Reagan spent in the early 1980s.

On reflection, Eisenhower would likely say that the persistence of a huge military budget without the threat to justify it reflects the power and influence of the military-industrial complex. He recognized that whereas U.S. economic interests had once broadly favored peace, there were, by the time he left office, crucial segments of industry, and entire regions of the country, that had become dependent on the sales of arms and equipment to the U.S. military.

As Eisenhower had predicted, the creation of a permanent armaments industry during the Cold War had created similarly permanent political constituencies that objected to cutting the military, or at least to cuts in the particular part of the military that happened to affect them directly. Whereas Americans had once armed for war, and then returned to peaceful pursuits when the wars ended, they now arm for the sake of arming. Every weapon system has defenders in Congress. Every community can come up with a dozen reasons for why *their* base shouldn't be cut. And that explains why it is so hard to cut the military's budget.

But it isn't impossible. I'll talk more about why that is on Thursday at APSA, and follow up with a summary of my remarks on the blog this Friday.

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