

Ike Reconsidered

How conservatives ignored, and liberals misconstrued, Eisenhower's warnings about military spending.

By [Christopher Preble](#)



Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military Industrial Complex

by James Ledbetter

Yale University Press, 280 pp.

During the first 150 years of its existence, the United States maintained a small standing army, mobilized additional personnel to fight the few wars declared by Congress, and then sent most of the men home when the war was won. Americans had little need for a large military, as the framers of the Constitution had hoped.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the United States created a massive military geared toward intervention overseas. Critics charged that the permanent national security state went hand in hand with the rise of the imperial presidency and the steady erosion of the power of Congress and the courts. Others warned of the loss of individual liberties under a “garrison state.”

No president worried more about this fundamental change in the nation's character than Dwight David Eisenhower. Eisenhower governed from the perspective that a nation's security was directly tied to the health of its economy. He believed that if military spending rose too high it would ultimately undermine U.S. security, which he saw as a product of both military and economic strength. Eisenhower also worried that a permanent armaments industry was fundamentally altering the relationship between citizens and their government.

He spoke of this many times, both in private correspondence and in his public speeches. But in May of 1959, writes James Ledbetter in his book *Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military Industrial Complex*, speechwriters Malcolm Moos and Navy Captain Ralph E. Williams met with the president's brother, Milton, to begin planning for an Eisenhower valedictory speech. In Moos's words, Eisenhower “was striving to reach tomorrow's conscience, not today's headlines.”

They succeeded. One line in particular has captured a place in the public's consciousness. The departing president warned his countrymen to be on guard against a “military-industrial complex” acquiring “unwarranted influence” in the halls of power. People typically refer to the farewell address as the “military-industrial complex speech.” Fifty years later, it is counted as one of the most important speeches of the twentieth century.

It is ironic, notes Ledbetter, that Eisenhower would be remembered for *any* speech, let alone one concerning the military and society. The general-president was known more for his syntactical challenges and malapropisms than for his stirring oratory.

Ledbetter, editor in charge at Reuters.com, provides a readable and well-informed argument for why the speech delivered on the evening of January 17, 1961, was different. The book explores the speech's history, and also looks forward, explaining why Eisenhower's warning about an unhealthy conjunction between the federal government, business, and the military still resonates.

“The very utility of the phrase” military-industrial complex (MIC), admits Ledbetter, “comes at the cost of a precise, universally accepted definition.” He applies a straightforward one—“a network of public and private forces that combine a profit motive with the planning and implementation of strategic policy”—but he explains that “the idea of the MIC became for many a kind of standing populist receptacle for dissatisfaction.” The “elastic interpretation of the MIC,” Ledbetter writes, has yielded “some fairly exotic results.”

It is understandable, he continues, “why critics of the MIC have wanted to invoke Eisenhower's authority, or why his presumed prophetic wisdom appears that much more admirable every time a critic finds another pernicious aspect of the MIC.” It is also unfortunate. Eisenhower was no liberal—far from it. And yet the embrace of the MIC by progressives and the antiwar left has overshadowed the elements of Eisenhower's speech that should appeal to conservatives. As a result, Ike has nearly been written out of the history of the Republican Party.



But now Eisenhower is back. National figures from President Obama to Defense Secretary Robert Gates have invoked Ike's words, especially his argument that the nation's fiscal health is a national security concern, to draw support for their policies. Ledbetter shows why his relevance persists.

Ledbetter begins by placing the MIC within a broader intellectual and historical context, noting that some arguments along these lines have been conspiratorial, bordering on hysteria. During the Senate Munitions Inquiry hearings of 1934–36, North Dakota Senator Gerald P. Nye claimed that President Woodrow Wilson and the “merchants of death” had subverted American interests and wasted thousands of American lives on a pointless and unnecessary war. According to Ledbetter, “historians have accepted ... with little fuss” Nye's claim “that the United States entered World War I for largely economic, as opposed to military or strategic, reasons,” but his charges went well beyond what the then-available evidence could support. As such, Nye's most politically inflammatory charges proved “highly controversial” and “helped derail [his] committee's work.”

The successful prosecution of World War II with support from the same industry that Nye had railed against provided a big boost to the MIC. In January 1944, Charles Wilson, the former president of General Motors and executive vice president of the War Production Board, called for the armed services and private businesses to work together, and to not be impeded “by political witch hunts, or thrown to the fanatical isolationist fringe tagged with a ‘merchants-of-death’ label.”

Eisenhower shared these sentiments. (What, after all, was the alternative? That business and the military *not* work together in wartime?) Ike proved that he was no Gerald Nye by making Wilson his first secretary of defense. Although Eisenhower's farewell address tapped into some of the same concerns invoked by Nye in the 1930s, the president's notions about the MIC were more sophisticated than Nye's. He also approached the problem from a very different philosophical foundation.

Take, for example, Eisenhower's concerns about protecting private property rights and individual liberty. Ledbetter traces this to the early 1930s, when then Major Eisenhower was assigned to the War Policies Commission, a panel created by Congress to explore the relationship between profit and war. “The removal of the element of profit from war,” Nye asserted in November 1934, “would materially remove the danger of more war.”

Ike doubted that this was true. He also recognized that separating profits from military industry would be detrimental to efficiency and corrosive to American values. To Eisenhower, the nationalization of private industries could only be justified in cases of dire national emergency. It would be unconscionable during peacetime.

Instead, Eisenhower aimed for balance. He worried that a failure to reconcile means (resources, public will) and ends (strategic goals) would pose as great a threat to the nation's security as did the Soviet menace. “[O]ur system,” he said, “must remain solvent, as we attempt a solution of this great problem of security. Else we have lost the battle from within that we are trying to win from without.”

He reiterated this philosophy in his first State of the Union address in February 1953: “Our problem,” he explained, “is to achieve adequate military strength within the limits of enduring strain upon our economy. To amass military power without regard to our economic capacity would be to defend ourselves against one kind of disaster by inviting another.”

Another worry, also expressed in the farewell address, was that too many Americans were becoming dependent upon the largesse of the federal government. Eisenhower predicted that this would discourage people from scrutinizing growing state power too closely. To put it crudely, you don't bite the hand that feeds you. The end result is lots of push on the part of people who benefit from massive federal spending, and relatively little push-back from those who pay. Public choice theorists call this the problem of concentrated benefits, diffuse costs.

In short, Eisenhower's critique was fundamentally *conservative*. Ike appreciated the need for a strong military, but hoped that society would weigh these requirements against other considerations, especially the danger inherent in shifting resources from the private economy to the federal government.

The fundamental conservatism of Eisenhower's critique was lost almost immediately after the speech as some within the antiwar left cast the military-industrial complex as evidence of the inherent flaws of modern capitalism. Anyone who invoked Eisenhower's warning, or even echoed the general-president's words, might find themselves lumped together with the likes of C. Wright Mills and Tom Hayden.

Meanwhile, other liberals played a crucial role in the expansion of the MIC. Some of the most outspoken critics of Eisenhower's approach to national security were Keynesian economists such as James Tobin, Paul Samuelson, and John Kenneth Galbraith, who objected to Ike's fiscal conservatism. Liberal critics of Eisenhower's approach to national security in the late 1950s were objecting chiefly to his attempt to strike a balance between private consumption and public

investment—they thought the balance was weighted too heavily toward the former. They hoped that the federal government would play a far more aggressive role in fostering full employment, and they saw military spending as a potential engine for economic growth. Hence the concept, not always uttered in a pejorative way, of military Keynesianism, whereby the Pentagon's budget becomes a thinly veiled jobs program.

Whereas the Keynesians thought this a useful by-product of a large national security state, Eisenhower viewed it as a threat to the Republic. Later scholars would call it the Iron Triangle. The persistence of an enormous military budget can be explained, in part, by the fact that defense workers protect their jobs by supporting politicians who steer money to their employers and by punishing those who do not. Military Keynesianism gives domestic politics a larger role in defense budgeting at the expense of international politics.

The MIC has created powerful, entrenched constituencies that always oppose reductions in military spending. "Many weary policy analysts," Ledbetter notes gloomily, "have concluded that military spending is simply the socially acceptable form of industrial policy in the United States." This loose alliance of the military with the business community and workers employed, directly or indirectly, by the military makes it likely that the Pentagon will prove as resistant to reform in the next few decades as it has in the past five.

It is axiomatic that defense spending rises during periods of great stress and public anxiety. Eisenhower faced down calls for massive spending increases after the launch of the *Sputnik* satellite in October 1957. After 9/11, Washington went one step farther, creating a new department ostensibly dedicated to the defense of the homeland. Some taxpayers might have been excused for believing that that was the job of the U.S. Department of Defense.

But Washington's response to 9/11 shouldn't surprise. The foreign policy elite tends to equate *spending* on national security with security itself. It follows that those who place fiscal considerations ahead of the demands of the military necessarily threaten national security.

In the late 1950s, Democrats (and a few Republicans) assailed Eisenhower on those grounds. Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, Missouri's Stuart Symington, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, and a young senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, knocked Eisenhower for constraining the military's budget and allowing fiscal considerations to shape the nation's strategic objectives. They charged that the president was forcing the nation to fight the Cold War with one arm tied behind its back, and that his decision to shift resources out of the Army, especially, limited the nation's flexibility to engage in land wars in Asia. Eisenhower responded by noting that he had no desire to replay the Korean War, and was confident that the nation's nuclear arsenal provided a credible deterrent to Soviet aggression.

It "rankled Eisenhower," Ledbetter writes, "that Democrats and their allies in the military and intelligence communities were inflating and distorting military issues for political gain." He reserved special scorn, however, for industry trade journals. The feeling was mutual. In the opinion of the editors of *Aviation Week*, Eisenhower's economizing amounted to "sacrific[ing] the relative position of the U.S. and the Soviet Union ... in favor of enjoying a few more years of the hedonistic prosperity that now unfolds our country."

This was more than a case of name-calling and political point-scoring. It ultimately boiled down to far more momentous questions about the nation's purpose, and the nation's priorities. "By 1959," Ledbetter explains, "Eisenhower had begun to see private military contractors as a self-interested, malign actor in the budget process." For the weapons manufacturers, the weapons were the end in themselves. For Eisenhower, the weapons were merely a means to an end, an end that combined security in the present day with the nation's long-term fiscal health, which was an equally valid concern.

Such sentiments might strike many modern readers as eminently sensible, but today's neoconservatives, the intellectual descendants of the liberal hawks of the late 1950s, reject the suggestion that America's fiscal circumstances require us to rethink our strategic ends. They are dismissive of deterrence and often, it seems, of basic geography. They say that we Americans can only be safe if the whole world is safe; that democracy in North America depends upon democracy in Southwest and Central Asia. They call for the U.S. military to drain the swamp, and would commit the nation to open-ended state-building crusades wherever terrorists might poke up their heads. Whenever a petty despot with a megaphone seems poised to seize control of any plot of land, the neocons are the first to call for intervention, though they are loath to do the fighting themselves.

Not much has changed, in other words, since Eisenhower uttered his fateful warning.

Eisenhower was not naive. He correctly anticipated that the military-industrial complex's influence over politics would be difficult to break. Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Americans today spend more on the military than at any time since World War II, and more than twice as much—in inflation-adjusted dollars—than when Ike left office. The general-

president clearly failed to convince his fellow Americans of the need to limit the military's growth. For all practical purposes, the MIC won.

Or, at least, it has up to this point. The fiscal catastrophe facing the federal government, though a long time coming, has invited renewed scrutiny over the Pentagon's budget. Eisenhower hoped that "an alert and knowledgeable citizenry" would constantly weigh the costs and benefits of national security policies "so that security and liberty may prosper together." Even many Republicans now concede that in their search for spending cuts, everything, even the military's budget, must be on the table. Although the military as an institution enjoys overwhelming support, a recent Reuters poll found that 51 percent of Americans support actual cuts in military spending, not merely the slowing of the rate of growth that Secretary Gates announced in January.

Strategic change is necessary if we are serious about bringing the Pentagon's budget under control. The United States in 2011 could have a far smaller military if Washington were to embrace restraint, an approach to global affairs characterized by the minimal use of force combined with extensive economic and cultural engagement around the world. Such a shift makes sense on its own terms, and would be consistent with the wise vision set forth fifty years ago by Dwight Eisenhower.
