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Power couple

Two presidents, two speeches — and a profound question about the American military that has yet to be answered

By Peter S. Canellos | August 15, 2010

The two most famous presidential speeches of the last 50 years occurred within three days of each other, yet exist in different spheres of memory. Dwight D. Eisenhower's farewell address flickers in the foggy black and white of early TV, a strange benediction from an old warrior; John F. Kennedy's inaugural address pierces the crystal blue of a Washington January, a burst of color and energy.

"We will pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty," Kennedy intoned.

Three days earlier, in a very different scene, his predecessor struck a note of aged wisdom, warning his countrymen to "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex."

Now, 50 years later, the Kennedy and Eisenhower libraries are preparing to mark the anniversary of the two famous speeches, but not highlighting any link between them. In fact, they represented the final shots in a year-long duel between the two men. Their dispute — whether boundless military spending should be seen as a symbol of national resolve, or a drain on national resources — is even more relevant today, without the Soviet Union as a rival. The arguments Eisenhower and Kennedy put forth — and the world views they presented — frame a debate that's been revived in Washington as recently as last week, when Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced sweeping cuts to the service budgets, calling for "separating appetites from real requirements."

Throughout his time in office, Eisenhower believed that as long as the United States had the power to destroy any foe, peace could be maintained. This required a large military budget, but not a limitless one. Kennedy, however, believed the United States should always be dominant in the world, and that Eisenhower, in holding the line on military spending, had allowed a "missile gap" to develop between the USSR and the USA. The gap didn't exist. (It's unclear when Kennedy, who was eventually briefed by the CIA, found out.) But so many military leaders, journalists, and defense contractors insisted it did exist that Kennedy gained significant political advantage, to Eisenhower's undying frustration.

Eisenhower's fear of a confluence of political and corporate forces pushing for military spending was palpable. But so too was Kennedy's belief that visible military superiority was essential to the nation's destiny. The two speeches sketched out different visions of the source of American strength. Eisenhower found it in the small towns of his own boyhood, in the solitary pursuit of virtue and innovation; Kennedy found it in the nation's willingness to mobilize behind a set of ideals.

By January 1961, when both men delivered their speeches, the dispute between Eisenhower and Kennedy was ending. Their driving points, however, would continue to be discussed. How much defense spending is too much? Is there ever a limit? In politics, will the more hawkish, fear-provoking stance always prevail?

Despite the end of the Cold War, the equation of military hardware with American strength endures, as indelible as Kennedy's fierce expression on that January afternoon. But so too does the skepticism represented by Eisenhower, the idea that while some defense spending is crucial, a lot of it is simply a tool of special interests — big corporations, opportunistic politicians, ideologues with hidden agendas — hiding under a cloak of patriotism. Eisenhower, in his waning days in office, could only wonder how he, a five-star general who was instrumental in winning World War II, could lose the trust of the people on national security, especially over a missile gap that did not, in fact, exist.

“Eisenhower’s vision played out through the Cold War, but in some respects it’s more remarkable that it persisted 20 years beyond the Cold War,” declares Christopher A. Preble, author of “John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap,” adding, “Eisenhower was a man going into retirement who really worried about what it would take to stand up to this. He perceived that a person of his stature wasn’t going to come along again. It was a warning, and a lament.”

In retrospect, the saga of the “missile gap” is the true precursor to that of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. Both followed events — the test of a Soviet intercontinental missile and the 9/11 attacks — that caused many people to think in terms of worst-case scenarios. Both were fanned by selective use of intelligence, much of it brandished by ideologues.

In the case of the missile gap, however, the president was the one urging moderation. Eisenhower was the product of a prairie boyhood in Abilene, Kan. Though his Army career paralleled the unprecedented growth of the military, he never lost the sense that true American values were found near the hearths of small-town America, and that concentrating too much power in big institutions could quell that spirit.

As president, he set his own defense policy. A professional strategist, he understood the importance of having a good plan and sticking to it. With a defense based on massive nuclear deterrence, Eisenhower determined that some of the conventional forces beloved of the Joint Chiefs — increased Army troops, new Air Force jets, more Navy carriers — were unnecessary. And, with his unique credibility, he felt freer than most presidents to reject the recommendations of the uniformed commanders.

Besides, even with a strategy based on creating a standoff between the two nuclear-fueled adversaries, the United States enjoyed major advantages: Its network of bases in Europe gave it numerous launch points for an attack on the Soviet Union, while the Soviets had no similar access to the United States. Then, in 1957, the Soviets tested an intercontinental missile, and soon after launched a satellite into space. The Soviet achievements caught the American public off guard; there was sudden concern about Soviet superiority.

Almost immediately, experts with axes to grind, either ideological (Paul Nitze, whose Truman-era call for a defense buildup was sidelined by Eisenhower), or financial (Werner Von Braun, seeking cash for his rocket program), or bureaucratic (former Army commanders Matthew Ridgway and Maxwell Taylor, who deplored Eisenhower’s neglect of conventional forces), or political (Kennedy and Stuart Symington, both presidential contenders), began to argue that the Soviet missile arsenal either dwarfed, or would soon dwarf, the American one.

Their evidence was a series of cryptic statements by those on the fringes of the intelligence establishment, amplified by journalists (including Joseph Alsop, a Kennedy supporter) who took the most speculative, worst-case scenarios and declared them to be true.

The administration’s denials sounded mealy-mouthed in comparison. When Eisenhower’s defense secretary, Thomas Gates, posited that even if a missile gap were to exist, there would be no “deterrence gap,” because of American air superiority, many in the country took it as confirmation that a missile gap did, in fact, exist.

Most distressing to Eisenhower was the fact that some military commanders, hoping to beef up budgets, seemed to be among those leaking dire estimates. And then there were Kennedy’s own needling comments.

“They cannot hide the basic facts that American strength...has been slipping, and communism has been steadily advancing,” Kennedy told the American Legion.

Eisenhower’s farewell was one of few presidential addresses to emphasize moderation; it stressed the need for “balance in and among national programs” and between “the private and public economy.” The last was clearly a reference to the sudden prominence of defense contractors among leading American corporations — firms with a live-or-die stake in government spending. Most distressing to him was that Kennedy had gone into factory towns and proclaimed that Eisenhower’s stinginess on defense had cost American jobs.

Boeing, for instance, was pushing the B-70 Valkyrie bomber to replace the B-52, at a cost of untold billions. Eisenhower felt it was a costly waste in the missile age; Kennedy suggested that it was necessary both for defense and to keep the defense industry churning. Eisenhower rejected the idea that defense spending was

good for the economy; unlike other types of public investment (such as his interstate highway system), unneeded defense hardware moldered in hangars and warehouses, with little usefulness.

Kennedy saw the issue through a completely different prism, believing that limiting defense spending to preserve the private economy was tantamount to declaring that America was too poor to defeat communism; throughout the campaign, he stressed the need to “bear any burden” against communism. “Only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger,” Kennedy declared in his inaugural address. “I do not shrink from this responsibility — I welcome it.”

The cause of “defending freedom” was close to Kennedy’s heart — and a key to overcoming one of his major political liabilities, his father’s support of the British appeasement of Nazi Germany. From his years at Harvard, Kennedy tried to separate his reputation from that of his father, writing a thesis that analyzed the failure of appeasement. And by the ’50s, any softness on defense, by any national figure, was perceived as an echo of Munich. Harry Truman “lost” China; Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956, was too professorial to be an effective defender of freedom. Rather than kindle memories of his father’s folly, Kennedy was determined to outflank the Eisenhower administration on defense.

All these factors were noticed by Eisenhower, who foresaw an endless defense mobilization at an unnecessary cost to what he, in his farewell address, called “our toil, resources, and livelihood.”

Fifty years later, such phrases are remembered, but their context is lost. Eisenhower and Kennedy’s views on military spending don’t fit the dominant historical narratives of either man. Eisenhower endures as the hero who won the war in Europe. The ’50s, the decade of his presidency, is recalled as a honeyed interlude, a national vacation after the trauma of the ’40s; it’s a serious misreading of an era of shell-shock and paranoia. As president, Kennedy retreated somewhat from the hawkishness of his campaign. (The Valkyrie was quietly scuttled.) In the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was a voice of moderation against some of the same hawks whom Eisenhower sought to contain. And after Kennedy’s death, his brothers chose to emphasize his liberalism; the Camelot myth takes no notice of his conservative stances.

Therefore, Kennedy’s inaugural address endures as an expression of energy and optimism (“Ask not what your country can do for you...”), its sterling phrases viewed largely through the lens of domestic progress. The military-industrial complex, meanwhile, is treated like a mystery, as if Eisenhower handed down a riddle for posterity. The phrase has been adopted by the antimilitarist left, invoked whenever opposition arises to an American military action. But there is little evidence that Eisenhower worried about militarism leading to war; his concerns were for the shattering impact of fear-mongering and budgetary waste on the domestic well-being of the country. Subsequent events have proven the acuity of his vision.

Members of Congress, seeking federal largesse for their districts, routinely broker deals for weapons systems that even Defense Department planners find unnecessary. Commanders routinely follow the revolving door from the Pentagon to industry, where they help maintain funding through a fusillade of lobbying — more than \$130 million worth per year — and volleys of campaign contributions — \$24 million for the 2008 cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Presidential candidates see far more political upside in supporting defense spending than in opposing it. And even with a budget of about \$700 billion — six times more than any other nation, by most estimates, and more than the next 18 combined — the perception of softness on national security can doom a president who seeks to trim the defense budget.

Former President George W. Bush’s advisers deprecated some costly weapons systems, but Bush’s own spare-no-cost rhetoric made any cuts impossible. President Obama has promised a serious effort to weed out waste, and even cited Eisenhower’s desire for a balance among national programs. Gates, too, has lauded Eisenhower as a prudent critic of the Pentagon. But the Obama administration’s level of commitment remains unclear; its fiscal review team has largely exempted defense spending from its deficit-reduction planning.

Kennedy’s zeal in promoting military hardware as an expression of strength suggests there is more behind political backing for a wasteful Pentagon bureaucracy than fear and manipulation. For the United States, a massive, spare-no-expense military functions like the ornate castles built by European monarchs: Its very wastefulness projects an image of wealth and power.

But when confronted with some of the arguments that feed the need to project power, it is vital to understand that worst-case estimates, magnified in the media and political glare, can surpass all bounds of rationality. The image sought by Kennedy was grounded in a real desire to boost American power, but constructed on a foundation of untruths. Eisenhower spoke to a reality that America, five decades hence, still can't fully accept.

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