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Capital from Carnage: An Analysis of the Military-Industrial Complex

by Kelly Krebaum

(English 2820)

War is not what it used to be. The guns have become missiles and surveillance radar, machines that search and destroy. The organized armies have become handfuls of thousands of men and women fighting without knowing when they will stop. The battlefields range from cities to mountains. War has become uglier, yet there are individuals who see war as a golden opportunity. Lockheed Martin, the nation's largest military contractor for war planes, raked in net sales of \$45.4 billion in 2013 by selling planes to the military to use in combat (Lockheed Martin Corporation). The problem is that many of these planes are defective and never even make it to the war zone. Yet, Lockheed pockets the profits anyway and comes out with another complex machine that will guarantee our victory. Other corporations have since followed suit, giving rise to the military-industrial complex and a vicious cycle America cannot escape. Our society's dependence on the military-industrial complex has cost us in more ways than one. The economy can function without the military-industrial complex; therefore, our leaders need to adopt an alternative solution. This solution must sustain the economy while providing the military with what it needs, just without the excessive spending and the squandering of soldiers on useless wars.

The term 'military-industrial complex' was coined by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Commonly called the MIC, there exists much speculation as to what the term actually refers to. In his widely-recognized 1961 speech, Eisenhower referred to the "conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry" (1037). Eisenhower spoke of the military working hand in hand with munitions contractors in order to increase defense spending and create an immense, specialized military force to fight for the United States. During Eisenhower's era, this increase in defense spending and for a properly trained volunteer military may have been necessary; however, Eisenhower also warned against ignoring "its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society" (1037). Eisenhower never intended for the establishment of a permanent war economy, for it would change the structure of our society to the extent that we would be unable to escape the demands of the industry. Indeed, the defense contractors "serving" the armed forces continue to line their pockets with taxpayer money today, with the military buyers continuing to spend billions on flawed weapons, planes, and weapon systems that will never even see combat. However, there are some that disagree with this assessment.

Critics of those that denounce the MIC claim that times have changed, saying the MIC has become more tame. Professor Charles J. Dunlap Jr. contends that the MIC is not the monster it is made out to be. In a journal article, he stresses the importance of context when comparing the MIC in Eisenhower's time and in the 21st century. In his view, Americans, like Defense Secretary Robert Gates, have heeded Eisenhower's warning and have kept the power of the MIC in check (Dunlap Jr., 143). Dunlap offers a valid point: the unchecked power of the military contractors that Eisenhower feared is no longer the only issue pervading the MIC of today. In fact, the MIC was debated long before Eisenhower's speech in 1961, and since then it has taken on a new meaning.

The conceptual definition of the MIC has changed over time. Bruce Brunton of James Madison University offers a more contemporary definition of the MIC that retains relevance today. In an article in *Social Science Journal*, Brunton explains that he sees the MIC as "...a set of institutions [...] The five institutions which collectively define the MIC are: (1) reliance on private contractors for peacetime military procurement; (2) the revolving door; (3) defense pressure groups;

(4) the preparedness ethos; and (5) state support of strategic industry" (Brunton). This definition offers a much better view of how several other factors characterize the modern MIC, including the mentality that the U.S. must be perpetually prepared for war during peacetime and the push by contractors for the government to maintain a base of defense production. The role of the media in the MIC also cannot be ignored. Not only are news outlets used to advertise for weapons merchants and corporations, but they also skew the public's view of ongoing wars and censor what those military-associated firms do not want Americans to see (Solomon, 113-114). Therefore, the MIC refers to the way our economy is based on defense spending, particularly on contracts from defense contractors, as well as the preparedness mentality and the role of the media in aiding military-associated firms. All this, of course, is in the name of our reinforcing our national security. Now that the MIC has been properly described, its role in the U.S. economy can be examined.

The MIC has turned war into a business. Defense contractors and manufacturers make the Pentagon spend big bucks for the development and sale of their latest military product. Unfortunately, in their effort to cut production costs, the products sold to the Pentagon are flawed and often are never utilized in a war. Many projects are scrapped before they even go on the market, but not before the Pentagon invests billions of dollars into them in the hopes that all the bugs will be fixed. There have been many documented cases of this phenomenon. One such case details the plight of the Sea-Based X-Band Radar (SBX), a project that surfaced in 2002 only to be canceled in 2012. In a *Chicago Tribune* article, David Willman described the SBX project as costly and constantly exhibiting poor performance during tests. Data shows that the SBX "has cost taxpayers about \$3 billion in design, construction, maintenance, operating, and other costs", but money kept pouring into similar projects like the SBX because Congress members "whose states and districts benefited from the spending tenaciously defended the programs" (Willman). Of course, members of the Missile Defense Agency, the agency that invested billions into the SBX and similar programs, were questioned. A retired director from the MDA, Henry Obering III, claimed that the Obama administration and Congress were to blame for the project's failures, "for not doubling down with more spending" (Willman). In essence, the MDA claimed the problems could be fixed if they were given more money. They neglected to mention that the SBX's incredibly narrow field of vision made it incapable of living up to its hype. Physicist Harvey Lynch likened the radar to "an extremely powerful soda straw" (Willman). The nation's defense budget continues to be squandered every year on faulty projects like the SBX, with the money pocketed by several large defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Raytheon. Quentin E. Hodgson, a strategist in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, once said that "What a military buys defines, in many respects, how it fights" (3). If this statement is true, perhaps the United States military should reevaluate their approach and stop investing in useless weapons for useless wars. Regardless of the defects in these costly projects, supporters of the MIC argue that it provides millions of American jobs.

Many officials have failed to tackle the problems with the MIC after taking a look at the nation's unemployment rate. The prospect of having more jobs for hard-working Americans is often enough to dismiss any ideas about changing the status quo. Democratic Senator Carl Levin from Michigan even stated, "Yes, there is a military-industrial complex [...] But it's not necessarily sinister. It's people. It's jobs" (qtd. in McCartney, 9). It is indeed a fact that the MIC does create many needed jobs. James McCartney cites in his article that "The defense industry employs more than eight million Americans." In addition, he states that the Pentagon's "procurement management staff [...] employs more than 165,000 people" (9). These are the people who oversee the purchase of military equipment from defense contractors. Projects like the SBX, for example, require manual laborers and teams of experts, designers, engineers, mechanics, electricians, test pilots, etc. States and districts with these jobs become prosperous and benefit from the increased tax revenue. Therefore, as stated by McCartney, "The defense industry is deeply involved in national politics [...] because congressmen and senators know that jobs can beget votes." When it comes to the prospect of

implementing an alternative to the MIC, this is a serious concern. However, Dr. Keith Suter offers a potential solution. Suter states in an article that the proposed alternative to the MIC "would need to campaign to ensure that as defense jobs declined, there was a compensatory rise in the non-defense employment sector (health, education, welfare, and public transport [...])" (62). Similar to when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps during the New Deal, new jobs can always be created through inventive innovation. Therefore, it is possible to replace the MIC our economy is dependent on without a critical drop in jobs or the unemployment rate. The jobs in the defense sector can be converted to jobs that would support peaceful causes. Yet, advocates of the MIC also argue that the perpetuation of our current system is needed to keep our national security strong.

When excessive defense spending is called into question, supporters of the MIC insist that the pricy, intricate weapons are a necessity for keeping foreign nations with weapons programs of their own from attacking. Obering defended this assessment with his claim that "We are building forces of good to defeat the force of evil" (qtd. in Willman). Most people worldwide would probably agree that if terrorists armed themselves and advanced on other nations, they would need to be stopped. However, it becomes difficult to recognize the potential good these proposed super weapons could do when they eat up taxpayer money and cannot even live up to their hype. The Pentagon's continued investment in economically unsound projects that do not adhere to the laws of science results in pocketed profits, pointless wars, and no dead terrorists. Robert J. Stevens, CEO of Lockheed Martin, insisted that the company "understands the importance of working to prevent conflict and promote peace as vital components of global security" (qtd. in Hartung 223). If building up our weapons arsenal promotes peace, then the Americans in 1982 that worried Reagan would bring the U.S. into nuclear war were worrying over nothing as he bulked up defense spending (Hartung 157). In reality, our excessive exportation of weapons and increased defense spending on weapons contracts is likely to fan the flames of conflict with other industrialized nations, leading to a higher chance of war breaking out. William D. Hartung says in his book, *Prophets of War*, that critics of Lockheed Martin's claims for peace "would suggest that weapons exports fuel arms races and make war more likely" (Hartung 231). Advocates for reduced defense spending contend that cutting spending on unneeded weapons and service contracts would not even weaken our defenses. After watchdog groups discovered several cuts that would save the defense department billions, Project On Government Oversight (POGO) Executive Director Danielle Brian stated, "The savings we have identified not only make sense, they can be achieved with no loss to our national security" ("Watchdog Groups Identify"). Therefore, the MIC does not keep our national security strong; in fact, it appears to stimulate arms races between nations and make war more of a reality.

The perpetuation of the MIC in the U.S. has ultimately made war more politically appealing. After all, wartime brings in far more profits than peacetime does. The reliance of the U.S. economy on weapons production and exportation has led big business to profit from war. Bruce Gagnon, a supporter of economic conversion, asks Americans to consider "if weapons are the number one industrial export, what is the global marketing strategy? 'Endless war' becomes the refrain" (qtd. in Sullivan 27). As long as weapons are needed for use in wars overseas, the profits will keep rolling in. Although they are pocketed by manufacturers first, these profits eventually are funneled into the campaigns of politicians that support the defense contractors and ultimately the MIC. However, despite the financial and political gains, wars demand the price of bodies to fight in them. According to Andrew J. Bacevich, politicians and the top one percent have decided not to pay that price. In his book, *Breach of Trust*, he writes, "Few of the very rich send their sons or daughters to fight. Few of those leaving the military's ranks find their way into the ranks of the plutocracy" (43). America's all-volunteer military allows American citizens to separate themselves from a war they insist should be fought. Likewise, the men and women that choose to serve are not given the opportunity to benefit from the wars they fight in. Thus, the ones profiting from war are allowed to watch from the

sidelines with their families as thousands of bodies from middle and lower-class America are sent to fight a war they cannot win; they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Bacevich also acknowledges the nation's growing indifference to the act of war. He states in *Breach of Trust*, "So as war became permanent and perpetual, it also ceased to matter [...]" (35). As the MIC continues to pump money into Washington, a state of everlasting war becomes the new normal for Americans. War is also costly, but, with the elimination of a war tax and any shred of financial responsibility, Americans will never have to pay for any war. Instead, the costs of war are paid for by the soldiers.

As with any war, soldiers are sent away from their homes and civilian lives only to return physically, mentally, and financially broken. As the fuel for the war machine, the perpetuation of the MIC in the U.S. causes even more of these soldiers in combat to suffer this fate. In his book, *War is a Racket*, former Marine Major General Smedley Butler declared, "Boys with a normal viewpoint were taken out of the fields and offices and factories and classrooms [...] they were made over; they were made to 'about face'; to regard murder as the order of the day" (8). Of course, Butler was referring to World War I, but his statement holds water today. Men and women are trained to kill in a war they do not even understand. Then, those same men and women are expected to forget everything they knew overseas and become productive members of society again. As the character Sergeant Price shows in Klay's short story "Redeployment", some individuals cannot simply leave their new lives as soldiers behind and return to their old ones unscathed. As the MIC causes war to resurface, these broken soldiers will be called away again and again and forced to rebuild their lives over and over. Bacevich contends that being continually sent into combat is detrimental to soldiers. He wrote that "[...] the effects of multiple combat tours ranged from troubling to downright horrifying [...]" In 2011, the year the Iraq War ended, one out of every five active duty soldiers was on antidepressants, sedatives, or other prescription drugs" (105). The effects of PTSD and mental scarring will only continue to cripple our military as Washington returns them to the battlefield over and over to feed the corporate monster the defense department has created. Clearly, General Butler's words, "[...]the soldier pays the biggest part of the bill" (8) still ring true today. In order to spare our soldiers from eternal tours of duty and to keep taxpayer money in the right hands, our nation must be slowly weaned off of the MIC. In addition, alternatives to the current system must be enacted and embraced by Washington and the American public.

Over the course of many years, advocates and experts have offered up potential solutions for replacing the MIC and restoring peace to the U.S. The elimination of the MIC would eliminate the abundance of profits that contractors and politicians receive from war. Without these benefits, the figures in Washington would think twice before sending thousands of troops on a lengthy suicide mission. Similarly, the cessation of increased production and exportation of super weapons would prevent America from accelerating the arms race with other countries. In order to prevent war from being declared in the first place, Butler suggests that the decision to go to war be entrusted to the very people who would fight in that war. He further insists that U.S. military forces be strictly confined to defense purposes on the home front (Butler 12). Butler's position is considered a radical one in the modern world. The offensive purposes of the military today are here to stay; also, the opinions of war experts and others outside of the armed forces must be considered when deciding whether or not to wage war. Seymour Melman offers a more approachable solution: economic conversion. This plan involves "[...] planning, designing, and implementing a transformation from a war economy to a peace economy" (Sullivan 25). In essence, manufacturers would build goods that would be used for peaceful purposes and for consumer use instead of weapons and instruments of war. For example, contractors could build hospital ships instead of naval destroyers. Author Kate Braestrup's son, a Marine, even claimed that, for humanitarian relief purposes "they were able to transform their equipment to rebuild infrastructure" (Sullivan 28). However, much effort and time is required for this approach. In order to prevent too much shock to the economy, less extreme, contemporary solutions should be pursued instead.

There are more feasible solutions that are worth pursuing. Rather than trying to eliminate war entirely (a daunting task), these resolutions focus on deterring war and cutting down the amounts of tax dollars wasted on contracts for doomed super weapons. Bacevich suggests that "[...] Americans should fund their wars on a pay-as-you-go basis [...] Citizens can pay higher taxes, forgo benefits, or reduce consumption" (190-191). War is more tempting if there is no cost involved; therefore, having to pay for war would deter politicians and Americans from jumping into it. Legislation that prevents excessive spending on wartime contracts is, by far, the most effective way to start reforming our current MIC. An attempt of this nature was made with the proposition of a bill termed the Comprehensive Contingency Contracting Reform Act of 2012. In a statement, Scott Amey from POGO said, "The legislation includes provisions to automatically suspend certain charged or indicted contractors, limit the time period of wartime contracts, ensure the use of contractors in security roles is appropriate and necessary, and require additional reporting about contract awards, contractor personnel, contract costs, performance data, and suspension and debarment actions" (Amey). The bill never made it out of Congress, but future attempts at similar legislation can stop defense contractors from doing as they please. Once the power of the producers is limited, the MIC's chokehold on the nation will start to loosen at last.

Dwight D. Eisenhower realized the dangerous implications of developing an economy dependent on war back in 1961. More than fifty years later, Americans have failed to heed Eisenhower's warning. The military-industrial complex encompasses much more than squandered tax dollars on useless weapons programs. It has falsely justified the waging of pointless, impossible wars, and it has sent more and more of our soldiers to die in the name of profiteering. The survivors are doomed to tortured lives off of the front lines until they are sent back to fight and die in vain once again. Though there are economic benefits for some select states, taxpayers nationwide end up paying a higher price that offsets the benefit of increased jobs. Eisenhower once stated, "This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children" (qtd. in Dunlap Jr. 140). Several solutions exist that offer Americans a chance to break free of the MIC they have created. If chances are not taken and Americans remain placated by the status quo, Americans will inherit a future where their greatest scientists have abandoned curing cancer in favor of creating the perfect nuclear warhead. Simply by enacting legislation that keeps defense spending under control, we can ensure that war does not become the new normal.

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