

Trump's \$1.5 trillion 'Dream Military'

By William J. Astore and Tom Engelhardt

OPINION

What constitutes national security and how is it best achieved? Does massive military spending really make a country more secure, and what perils to democracy and liberty are posed by vast military establishments? Questions like those are rarely addressed in honest ways these days in America. Instead, the Trump administration favors preparations for war and more war, fueled by potentially enormous increases in military spending that are dishonestly framed as "recapitalizations" of America's security and safety. Such framing makes Pete Hegseth, America's self-styled "secretary of war," seem almost refreshing in his embrace of a warrior ethos. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham is another "warrior" who cheers for conflict, whether with Venezuela, Iran, or even — yes! — Russia. Such macho men revel in what they believe is this country's divine mission to dominate the world. Tragically, at the moment, unapologetic warmongers like Hegseth and Graham are winning the political and cultural battle here in America.

Of course, US warmongering is anything but new, as is a belief in global dominance through high military spending. Way back in 1983, as a college student, I worked on a project that critiqued President Ronald Reagan's "defense" buildup and his embrace of pie-in-the-sky concepts like the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), better known as "Star Wars." Never did I imagine that, more than 40 years later, another Republican president would again come to embrace SDI (freshly rebranded as "Golden Dome") and ever-more massive military spending, especially since the Soviet Union, America's superpower rival in Reagan's time, ceased to exist 35 years ago. Amazingly, Trump even wants to bring back naval battleships, as Reagan briefly did (though he didn't have the temerity to call for a new class of ships to be named after himself). It'll be a "golden fleet," says Trump. What gives? For much of my life, I've tried to answer that very question. Soon after retiring from the US Air Force, I started writing for TomDispatch, penning my first article there in 2007, asking Americans to save the military from itself and especially from its "surge" illusions in the Iraq War. Tom Engelhardt and I, as well as Andrew Bacevich, Michael Klare, and Bill Hartung, among others, have spilled much ink (symbolically speaking in this online era) at TomDispatch urging that America's military-industrial complex be reined in and reformed. Trump's recent advocacy of a "dream military" with a proposed budget of \$1.5 trillion in 2027 (half a trillion dollars larger than the present Pentagon budget) was backed by places like the editorial board of the Washington Post, which just shows how frustratingly ineffectual our efforts have been. How discouraging, and again, what gives?

Sometimes (probably too often), I seek sanctuary from the hell we're living through in glib phrases that mask my despair. So, I'll write something like: America isn't a shining city on a hill, it's a bristling fortress in a valley of death; or, At the Pentagon, nothing succeeds like failure, a reference to eight failed audits in a row (part of a 30-year pattern of financial finagling) that accompanied disastrous wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Such phrases, no matter how clever I thought they were, made absolutely no impression when it came to slowing the growth of militarism in America. In essence, I've been bringing the online equivalent of a fountain pen to a gun fight, which has proved to be anything but a recipe for success.

In America, nothing — and I mean

nothing! — seems capable of reversing massive military spending and incessant warfare. President Ronald Reagan, readers of a certain (advanced) age may recall, was nicknamed the "Teflon president" because scandals just didn't seem to stick to him (at least until the Iran-Contra affair proved tough to shed). Yet history's best candidate for Teflon "no-stick" status was never Reagan or any other president. It was and remains the US warfare state, headquartered on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. And give the sclerotic bureaucracy of that warfare state full credit. Even as the Pentagon has moved from failure to failure in warfighting, its war budgets have continued to soar and then soar some more.

all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

"In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

"We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."



US President Donald Trump speaks at a rally for American troops at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, with service members in the background and a banner reading "Peace Through Strength" during his visit to the Persian Gulf base on May 15, 2025.

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Forgive the repetition, but what gives? When is our long, national nightmare of embracing war and (wildly overpriced) weaponry going to end? Obviously, not anytime soon. Even the Democrats, supposedly the "resistance" to President Trump, boast openly of their support for what passes for military lethality (or at least overpriced weaponry), while Democratic members of Congress line up for their share of war-driven pork. To cite a cri de coeur from the 1950s, have they no sense of decency?

Shameless embrace of forever war and its spoils

I'm just an aging, retired Air Force lieutenant colonel. Who cares what I think? But America should still care about the words of Dwight D. Eisenhower, also known as Ike, the victorious five-star general of D-Day in 1944 and beyond, and this country's president from 1953 to 1961. Ike was famously the first significant figure to warn Americans about the then-developing military-industrial complex (MIC) in his farewell address to the nation. Yet, even then, his words were largely ignored. Recently, I reread Ike's warning, perhaps for the 100th time and was struck yet again by the way he highlighted the spiritual dimension of the challenge that is, all too sadly, still facing us.

In case you've forgotten them (or never read them), here are Ike's words from that televised address in January 1961, when he put the phrase "the military-industrial complex" in our language:

"This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence — economic, political, even spiritual — is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources, and livelihood are

Those were the prescient words of the most senior military man of his era, a true citizen-soldier and president, and more than six decades later, we should and must act on them if we have any hope left of preserving "our liberties and democratic processes."

Again, wise words, yet our leaders have seldom heeded them. Since 1961, the "disastrous rise of misplaced power" when it comes to the MIC has infected our culture, our economy, even — to steal a term from the era of the disastrous American war in Vietnam — our hearts and minds. Indeed, despite the way the MIC failed so spectacularly to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese, the Afghans, the Iraqis, and other embattled peoples across the globe in various misbegotten and mendacious wars, it did succeed spectacularly over the years in winning the hearts and minds of those who make the final decisions in the US government.

In an astonishing paradox, a spend-thrift military establishment that almost never wins anything, while consistently evading accountability for its losses, has by now captured almost untrammelled authority within our land. It defies logic, but logic never was this country's strong suit. In fact, only recently, we reached a point of almost ultimate illogic when America's bully-boy commander-in-chief insisted that a Pentagon budget already bloated with cash needs an extra \$500 billion. That, of course, would bring it to about \$1.5 trillion annually. Apologies to my Navy friends but even drunken sailors would be challenged to spend that mountain of money.

In short, no matter what it does, the Pentagon, America's prodigal son, never gets punished. It simply gets more. More, More, More!

Not only is such colossal military spending bad for this country, but it's also bad for the military itself, which, after all, didn't ask for Trump's pro-

posed \$500 billion raise. America's prodigal son was relatively content with a trillion dollars in yearly spending. In fact, the president's suggested increase in the Pentagon budget isn't just reckless; it may well wreck not just what's left of our democracy, but the military, too.

Like any massive institution, the Pentagon always wants more: more troops, more weapons, more power, invariably justified by inflating (or simply creating) threats to this country. Yet, clarity of thought, not to speak of creativity, rarely derives from excess. Lean times make for better thinking, fat times make for little thought at all.

Not long ago, Trump occasionally talked sense by railing on the campaign

Ike warned us about the "disastrous rise of misplaced power" if we failed to challenge it back in 1961. Recall that he also warned us that the MIC could change the very structure of our society, making America far less democratic and also far less free. And most subtly, he warned us that it might also weaken America spiritually.

What did he mean by that? To reference a speech Ike made in 1953, he warned then that we could end up hanging ourselves from a cross of iron. He warned that we could become captives of militarism and war, avid believers in spending the sweat of our laborers, the genius of our scientists, and the blood of our youth, pursuing military dominance globally, while losing our democratic beliefs and liberties at home in the process. And that, it seems to me, is exactly what did indeed happen. We the people were seduced, silenced, or sidetracked via slogans like "support our troops" or with over-the-top patriotic displays like military parades, no matter that they represented something distinctly less than triumphant in their moment.

And it never ends, does it? Americans in various polls today indicate that they don't want a war against either Venezuela or Iran, but our opinions simply aren't heeded. Increasingly, we live in a "might makes right" country, even as military might has so regularly made for wrong since 1945.

And what in the world is to be done? Many things, but most fundamentally it's time as a society to perform an "about-face," followed by a march in double-time away from permanent war and toward peace. And that, in turn, must lead to major reductions in Pentagon spending. The best and only way to tackle the inexorable growth of the blob is to stop feeding it money — and stop worshipping it as well. Instead of a \$500 billion increase, Congress should insist on a \$500 billion decrease in Pentagon spending. Our task should be to force the military-industrial complex to think, improvise, become leaner, and focus on how most effectively to protect and defend America and our ideals, rather than fostering the imperial dreams of the wannabe warlords among us.

Trump's current approach of further engorging the imperial blob is the stuff of national nightmares, not faintly a recipe for American greatness. It is, in fact, a sure guarantee of further decline and eventual collapse, not only economically and politically but spiritually as well, exactly as Ike warned in 1961. More wars and weapons simply will not make America great (again). How could they when, as Civil War General William T. Sherman so famously observed, war is "all hell"?

Americans, we must act to cut the war budget, shrink the empire, embrace diplomacy, and work for peace. Sadly, however, the blob has seemingly become our master, a well-nigh unstoppable force. Aren't you tired yet of being its slave?

On the 250th anniversary of America's founding, which was predicated on resistance to empire and military rule, it should be considered deeply tragic that this country has met the enemy — and he is indeed us. Here the words of Ike provide another teachable moment. Only Americans can truly hurt America, he once said. To which I'd add this corollary: Only Americans can truly save America.

As we celebrate our nation's birthday this July 4th, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could save this deeply disturbed country by putting war and empire firmly in the rearview mirror? A tall task for sure, but so, too, was declaring independence from the mighty British Empire in 1776.

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Taking on the MICIMATTSHG, or blob

Ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern coined a useful acronym from the classic military-industrial complex, or MIC. He came up with MICIMATT (the Military-Industrial-Congressional-Intelligence-Media-Academia-Think-Tank complex) to highlight its blob-like growth. And it's true that Congress and the rest are all deeply implicated in the blob. To which I'd add an "S" for the sporting world, an "H" for Hollywood, and a "G" for the gaming sector, all of which are implicated in, influenced by (as well as influencing), and often subservient to Ike's old MIC. So, what we now have is the MICIMATTSHG. Recall that