

# The Myth of the Military-Industrial Complex

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USS Carl Vinson underway in the Arabian Gulf in 2014 (Photo: US Navy)

By [Greg S. Jones](#)

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The conspiracy-minded are once again inveighing against the sinister defense contractors who supposedly control America's purse strings. The reality of the federal budget is much less exciting.

Donald Trump's recent military overtures toward Syria and North Korea have revived one of the more resilient myths in American political history: namely, that Washington makes defense policy according to the desires of a mysterious and immensely powerful "military-industrial complex."

From former Ohio congressman [Dennis Kucinich](#) to late-night talk show host [Bill Maher](#) to former Presidential candidate [Ron Paul](#), Trump's newfound militarism has unleashed a torrent of conspiratorial pundits bemoaning the ill-defined network of politicians, generals, and defense contractors that supposedly enriches itself at the republic's expense.

But while there is certainly no shortage of symbiotic back-scratching between Washington and the defense industry, the notion that a shadowy cabal drives defense policy doesn't jibe with reality.

The idea of a military-industrial complex originated with President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who warned in his farewell address of the increasing coziness between the state and vendors of war:

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

Eisenhower's words were apropos for the time. Military spending accounted for roughly 10 percent of American GDP in 1961, a staggering figure considering that the Second World War had been over for more than 15 years and the Korean War for nearly a decade. It was a time of relative peace, and yet big bucks for the defense industry.

Since then, however, defense spending has steadily declined as a proportion of GDP, albeit with a few occasional upticks; by 2016 it had shrunk to just under 3.2 percent. In fact, it has only exceeded 5 percent four times since 2001, despite America's involvement in two wars, and several war-like entanglements, over that period.

While these wars and engagements were certainly expensive in terms of real dollars, the steady decline of defense spending as a percentage of total economic output puts the lie to the idea of an all-powerful defense industry controlling the country's purse strings. And while one can certainly make the argument that the federal government spends too much money on instruments of war — and that that money is not always utilized efficiently — the military's shrinking fiscal footprint in terms of GDP should be celebrated, not disingenuously demonized.

Furthering belief in an all-powerful military-industrial boogeyman serves no one, particularly given the current climate.

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But blind partisanship has made this particular truth inconvenient, so the leftist (and sometimes libertarian) effort to discredit the defense industry continues apace. A simple Internet image search for “[defense spending meme](#)” reveals numerous charts and diagrams purporting to show federal defense spending dominating the federal budget at the expense of nearly everything else.

These infographics are so prevalent, in fact, that left-leaning websites [Politifact](#) and [FactCheck.org](#) have stepped in to point out the obvious fallacy that plagues them: They only reference “discretionary” spending, or what Congress spends via appropriations bills, which accounts for roughly one-third of the total federal budget. “Mandatory” spending — mostly on entitlements such as Social Security, Medicare, and the SNAP food-stamp program — accounts for the lion’s share of the budget. In 2015, for instance, defense spending consumed 54 percent of the discretionary spending, but only 16 percent of all federal spending.

Though I like Ike, his warning was way off the mark: the Democratic-entitlement complex is the real Leviathan threatening the integrity and spirit of America. In fact, while defense spending as a factor of GDP has steadily declined, welfare and entitlement spending has [ballooned](#) to nearly four times what it was when Ike began his second term. Social Security and Medicare alone [consumed](#) nearly three times more money than [defense](#) last year.

And that’s the *good* news. While advances in technology, and hopefully policy, may well continue to increase the efficiency of America’s defense spending, the costs of the entitlements beloved by Democrats are only set to increase. By 2047, the CBO projects that Social Security and Medicare alone will consume [half](#) of all non-interest federal spending.

Don’t get me wrong: There is certainly plenty of room to streamline defense spending and reduce bureaucracy and backscratching in the Pentagon’s contracting processes. But furthering belief in an all-powerful military-industrial boogeyman serves no one, particularly given the current climate.

History has demonstrated time and time again America’s need for a robust, capable defense that nevertheless knows its own limits. Unfortunately, Trump has inherited a historically deficient military — a recent Heritage Foundation [analysis](#) rated America’s armed forces “marginal” — and a dangerous, fast-changing geopolitical landscape. Threats abound, from Russia to China to North Korea to ISIS, and Trump has [pledged](#) to increase military spending accordingly.

But that’s just good defense policy; it’s not the result of some sinister conspiracy.

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