

The Military-Industrial Complex in The West

Growing up in Northern California, specifically Humboldt county, rumors always swirled around the community of a nuclear missile silo. Some said it was near Ferndale, others mention Crescent city, while even more rumored it to be deep in the forest, in some secret military base. I was scared. People, young and old, would claim, if a nuclear war started we would be one of the first to be hit, because of the nuclear missile silos close proximity. There was little fact to these rumors, or I should say, there is little documentation to these rumors. I believe they started because of the heavy military presents in the area. Just glancing at a map of northern California there are four Army national guard bases, one Army national guard armory, one Army base, one Army depot, one Army Corps of Engineers base, one Air force base, and numerous Coast guard bases, and all of that is not counting the countless number of recruiter offices. As surprising as it might be, this is not a singular occurrence, it can be seen throughout the whole of America.

This is all a part of the military-industrial complex of the United States. The military-industrial complex is an informal agreement that the defense industry will supply the nation's military. Both sides gain benefits, the defense industry profits massive amounts of money, while the military obtains weapons for war. The term is most often used in reference to the military of the United States, and it gained popularity when Dwight D. Eisenhower used the term in his farewell address. In regard to the United States the term is often extended to military-industrial-congressional complex, adding the U.S. congress, and is often referred to as

the iron triangle. This added complexity makes it much easier to secure funding, lobbying, contributions, and oversight, all to further bolster the United States military.¹

Throughout my paper I will examine how and why this controversial issue arose. Specifically, through laws and actions that put the funding and policies in the same hands. I will focus directly on the American West, the geographical area I was born and live, with a focus on how it started and the general impact it had on the economy. Also, I will examine the cultural impact, both good and bad.

The War of 1812 is considered a dismal failure, and in 1814 almost caused a collapse of the U.S. government. This spurred the Senate to create a Committee on Military Affairs and the Committee on Naval Affairs in 1816, giving the government more control of the military during peacetime with an emphasis on military spending. In 1822 the House of Representatives did the same, going so far as naming them the same, in 1911 these two committees merged, forming the Committee on Military Affairs. During the American Civil War President Abraham Lincoln looked to these houses for help in commanding the military. The houses both appointed Senators and Congressmen, many of which had no understanding of the military but they held great

¹ Most of the definition of the military-industrial complex, and the term Iron Triangle are derived from Robert Higgs *Depression, War, and Cold War Studies in Political Economy*, where he writes directly about the military-industrial complex, but focuses on the political nature.

weight within the politics. This “led to the creation of an entire class of military officers—the so-called political generals.”²

Before America entered World War I it began to prepare. The Senate and House initiated the largest buildup of the American military in history through the National Defense Act of 1917. After the war the Military Affairs and Naval Affairs Committees began investigating the allegations that the Senate and the House were bullied into joining the war by “merchants of death.” This proved to be true, at least in part. If the Allies would have lost, then Britain, France, Russia and Italy would have defaulted on loans for these “merchants of death” and would have triggered a collapse of the American banking industry.

This was the birth of the military-industrial-congressional complex. There were multiple Neutrality Acts passed to try and prevent the sale of war materials to both sides of a conflict, but they could easily be circumvented.³ The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 combined all the previous committees and organizations into a single Armed Services Committee with the sole

² Quote and historical documentation taken from Sterling Michael Pavelec’s *The Military-Industrial Complex and American Society*, an extremely in-depth and well-rounded book with a very dense look at the political upbringing of the military-industrial complex.

³ The Neutrality Acts could be circumvented in numerous ways. In the beginning there was no way to deal with wars if the United States had a direct interest. The most prominent, and easily distinguishable way to circumvent the Neutrality Acts is to not call a conflict a war.

responsibility for every branch of the United States military. The National Security Act of 1947 did much of the same, giving rise to the Department of Defense.⁴

Now, I want to take a step back and look at arms manufacturers and defense contracts as they have a huge impact on the GDP of the United States. The United States government tried to fulfill its own needs for war weapons, but it was not sufficient to arm everyone during the American Civil War. So, they turned to corporations, who they gave contracts to fill.⁵ After the contracts were filled all of the manufacturers returned to civilian needs. In 1917 this caused issues as even with stockpiles the United States did not have enough weapons to arm everyone for World War I. The same happened in World War II but this time the United States Government offered a lot more money for the contracts, creating an even higher incentive. So, many civilian manufacturers turned to these government contracts and were heavily awarded. During the Cold War the United States kept contracting for weapons creating a massive debt, but it incentivized companies to remain wartime producers.⁶

⁴ The National Security Act of 1947 also created the U.S. Air Force, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council, and the Central Intelligence Agency. These specific Acts and committees are referenced from Sterling Michael Pavelec's *The Military-Industrial Complex and American Society*.

⁵ Remington Arms Company, Colt Firearms Company, and Winchester Repeating Firearms Company, where all given contracts to fill.

⁶ Referenced from Nicholas Parrillo's "The Government at the Mercy of Its Contractors: How the New Deal Lawyers Reshaped the Common Law to Challenge the Defense Industry in World War II." This is a very in-depth look at all the laws pertaining to the New Deal and the defense industry.

The Move West

The military-industrial complex moved West quickly following, or in some cases preceding, pioneers first journeys. The military did more than just protect, they built roads, bridges, canals, built dams, dredged rivers, and even mapped the entire region. “[The military] virtually gave birth to the service industries of the West.”

In 1850 the per capita ratio of military personnel to the general population was over fifty times greater in Montana compared to the rest of the United States. In 1880 Wyoming, New Mexico, and Arizona’s ratio was almost as high. The states became increasingly dependent on military expenditures because of the service establishments and manufacturing complexes. The funds coming in from the federal government were just behind in total profits to mining and cattle raising.

“In 1943, 428,000 military people were stationed in the Mountain states. Of these, the 144,000 in Arizona equaled the entire workforce in the state in 1940.”⁷ Compare that to the 18,297 active troops in Arizona in 2017 and the number is even more staggering.⁸ About one-third of the populace in Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming were employed by the military. In 1943 Utah had twice as many military personnel as they had engaged in mining.

⁷ Quotes and statistics taken from the U.S. Census reports and reproduced in *The West and the Military-Industrial Complex* by Gerald D. Nash. For a more in-depth look see Gerald D. Nash, *World War II and the West: Reshaping the Economy*.

⁸ 2017 troop numbers taken from Military Active-Duty Personnel, Civilians by State, Unknown author.

The Korean War Greatly increased these numbers, and at the end they never ceased. Between 1940 and 1960 there was a 145 per cent increase in military employment in the mountainous west, this trend continued between 1960 and 1990. Out of the top ten leading states receiving government contracts for space research and for defense four were in the West; California, Colorado, Washington, and Utah. Federal contracts were much the same, the West ranked highest with Utah and Colorado topping the charts, with other western states close behind.⁹

During the 1960s the United States Air Force buried 1,000 Minuteman missiles across tens of thousands of miles on the Great Plains of America. These missiles were buried in backyards, farmland, and in one instance only a few hundred feet away from a school. American's were supposed to overlook the fact that these missile silos buried underneath their yards, and many did. "Despite the vastness of the missile program, very few people outside of the missile fields knew much about it; certainly, few people knew where the silos were, and even the people who did know generally chose not to think about them."

Though this is not to say they did not care that the federal government was having a big impact on their land. "Many area landowners thought of the silos as giant red bull's-eyes, their

⁹ Statistical data taken from *The Changing Economic Structure of the Mountain West, 1850-1950* by Leonard J. Arrington where he examines the economic structure of the west from a very statistical perspective.

ranches always in the crosshairs of a Soviet missile.”¹⁰ This is exactly how I felt back home in Humboldt county. Even though my fears were irrational, knowing that there is even a slight chance of a missile launch is enough. These people in the American Heartland knew they were a perfect bull’s-eye for the Soviet’s missiles.

Public opinion has always gone back and forth in regard to the U.S. defense budget. Higgs gathered polling information from the most popular polls during 1965 through 1992 from Gallup, Roper, CBS, NBC, ABC, Harris, and the National Opinion Research Center. Higgs only used polls that were as unbiased as possible where “respondents allowed them the alternatives ‘spend more’ or ‘spend less’ and was specifically about spending.” This led to a fairly direct correlation. If public opinion wanted lower defense spending the year before the budget would go down, and vice versa. But correlation does not equal causation. Higgs goes on to state that there are ways that show the budget being reduced but in fact they remain the same. There is “cut insurance” which provides a certain amount of extra money that the defense budget does not need or expect. So, when these funds get removed by Congress they can make a claim that they slashed the budget.

Higgs also goes in-depth on how public opinion is shaped. Higgs remarks that these officials are the ones on television and in the media; they can often “change the meaning or weight that the public attaches to the known, indisputable facts.” But public opinion almost always comes in a year or two later, so these politicians have to always play a certain amount of

¹⁰ Quotes and references from *The Missile Next Door the Minuteman in the American Heartland* by Gretchen Heefner. Within this book Heefner goes into extreme detail on the initial installation and the impact the missiles had in the American Heartland.

catch-up. There are also many advocates for a lower defense budget. So, as public opinion sways back and forth the budget makes much of the same motions. Whether these two are a direct relation is still unclear.¹¹

You could say that the birth of the military-industrial-congressional complex started long before the War of 1812, or long after, and you might be right. The issue has to do with impact. You could say it created jobs and bolstered the economy or that it was one of the causes of the great depression, both would be right. You could say it got people talking, deciding how much, if any, federal involvement you want in your own backyard. You could also say that the damage done to the environment has no excuse, but then America would have never expanded as rapidly as it did. Any way you look at it the military-industrial-congressional complex has had a great impact on the United States economy and military, and in many respects on how many conflicts the United States has been through. There are two sides to every coin, but there are many more when you look into the military-industrial-congressional complex.

¹¹ References and quotes about public opinion are from Robert Higgs' *Depression, War, and Cold War Studies in Political Economy*. For a more in-depth look at the benefits and pitfalls of measuring public opinion see chapter 10 Public Opinion: A Powerful Predictor of U.S. Defense Spending.

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