Unwarranted Influence, by James Ledbetter

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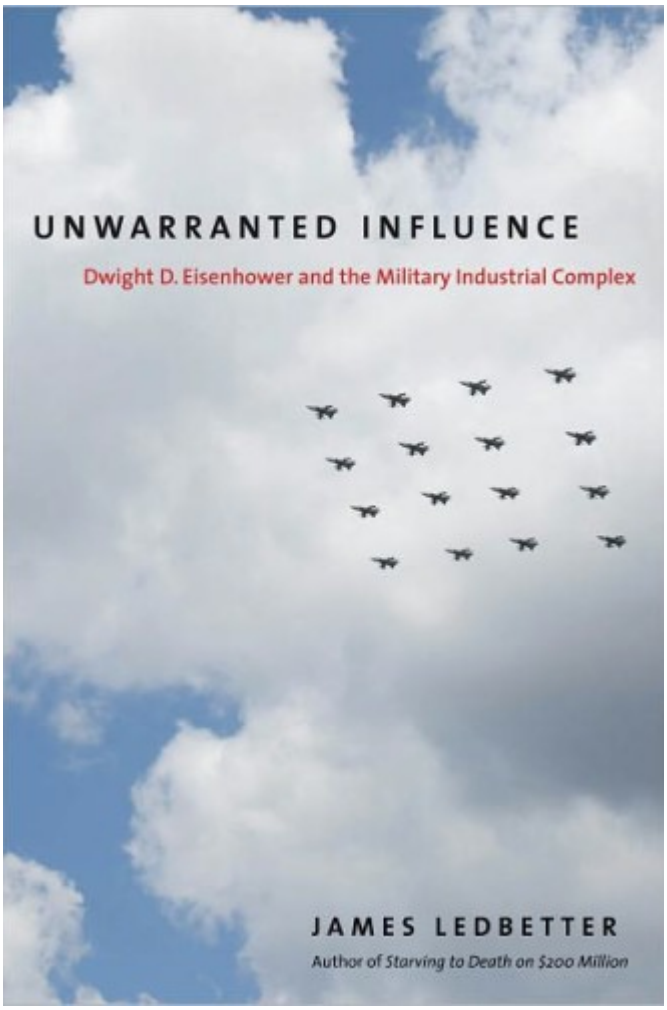
In Review



Unwarranted Influence

By James Ledbetter
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The most famous farewell addresses in the history of the American presidency are those delivered by two of the greatest military leaders to occupy the office: George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower. Both warned of the threat that military power and its interests posed to the nation. Though Washington's address is best remembered for his admonition against entanglements in European alliances and conflicts, the first president also urged Americans to conduct their affairs in a way that would allow them to "avoid the necessity of those overgrown Military establishments, which under any form of Government are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty." Eisenhower's speech is recalled above all for its cautionary words about the dangers of a "military-industrial complex."

We have long had a fine book on Washington's speech, Felix Gilbert's *To the Farewell Address* (1961). Now James Ledbetter has given us an excellent study to mark the 50th anniversary of Eisenhower's farewell.

Eisenhower delivered the speech on January 17, 1961, three days before leaving office. Recently discovered evidence indicates that this was not a hastily prepared event. Eisenhower himself proposed a farewell address in late May 1959, though its themes were not hammered out by his speechwriters, led by Malcolm Moos and Milton Eisenhower, until the fall of 1960. It remains unclear which of them came up with the phrase "military-industrial complex," but Ledbetter demonstrates that the concept had a long pedigree.

Warnings about the baleful influence of a nexus between the arms industry and the American military dated back at least as far as investigations in the early 1930s by Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota, which concluded that "the influence of the commercial motive is an inevitable factor in considerations involving the maintenance of the national defense" and "one of the inevitable factors often believed to stimulate and sustain wars." This concern was echoed in a best-selling book by H. C. Engelbrecht and F. C. Hanighen, *Merchants of Death* (1934). (The more inflammatory phrase that is the title of their book is not in Eisenhower's speech, though it is found in a memorandum by his speechwriter Ralph Williams.)

Even more influential on Eisenhower's thinking was the widely discussed warning issued during World War II by leading political scientist Harold Lasswell that the United States (among other powers) had the potential to develop into a "garrison

state" in which "the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society." Eisenhower used the term *garrison state* on several occasions during his presidency.

As the cold war intensified, such concerns grew because it was becoming apparent that the U.S. was building what Ike termed a "permanent arms industry of vast proportions." As Ledbetter suggests, one can almost read passages in *The Power Elite* (1956) by radical sociologist C. Wright Mills as a rough draft for Eisenhower's address. It is not likely that Ike read the book, even though he spent years as Mills's boss at Columbia University.

Of course, a wide political chasm separated Mills and Eisenhower. Indeed, as Ledbetter observes, one of the great ironies of Eisenhower's address is that its signal sound bite subsequently became largely the property of the American left and of critics far more hostile to the military-industrial complex than Eisenhower himself was (like Tom Hayden and other progeny of Mills). The president's preoccupation in the address—as it had been throughout his two terms—was with the balance between national security, fiscal responsibility and the well-being of private capitalism. He did not propose to dismantle the military-industrial complex. Indeed, in the speech he proposed no specific measures to curb its "unwarranted influence." He aimed only, he said, at "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."

Another feature of the speech that has too often been lost in the intervening years is the emphasis Eisenhower placed on the incorporation of American research universities into the military-industrial complex. The passages in which he worries over this development are the most passionate and biting in the address. "The free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery," he said, "has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity." (Ironically, Moos, who may have written these words, came under siege later in the 1960s when he was president of the University of Minnesota and student protesters demanded an end to the institution's war-related research and investment.)

Ledbetter argues that Eisenhower's speech had an "apologetic aspect." And well it might, for "the military-industrial complex grew up largely on his watch." His tenure in the White House witnessed the largest peacetime growth in military spending in

U.S. history, as the military's share of the national budget grew from 30 percent in 1950 to 70 percent in 1957. In absolute terms, military spending rose from $358 billion in 1952 to $585 billion in the last Eisenhower budget.

Throughout his presidency, from his important "Chance for Peace" speech of 1953 to the farewell address, Eisenhower seems to have been gripped by a deep ambivalence about the rapidly growing national security state that he was helping to build. On the one hand, he speculated on the possibility that "atomic weapons could be wholly eliminated from the world's armaments." Yet at the same time he oversaw a shift in American military policy: the "New Look" moved massive nuclear retaliation and a huge atomic arsenal to the center of that policy. In the farewell speech, this ambivalence found expression in its repeated invocations of "balance." But if Eisenhower balanced the demands of preparing for war and moving toward peace rhetorically, he succeeded far less in doing so as a matter of policy.

To be sure, as Ledbetter says, Ike cannot be held entirely responsible for the growth of the military-industrial complex in the 1950s. Many members of Congress were even less inclined to slow its pace, especially when funding of military projects in their home districts was at stake. Ike's Democratic opponents said little about the dangers of the military-industrial complex, preferring instead to criticize Eisenhower for moving too slowly to ratchet it up and to close the putative "bomber gap" and "missile gap" with the Soviet Union.

The temptation is to treat Eisenhower's ambivalence and the difficult balancing act he called for (and, much less successfully, undertook) as an unhappy product of the cold war—a necessary consequence of mounting an effective resistance to Russian tyranny. This is certainly how Ike framed the issue in the speech, much of the first part of which was devoted to boilerplate cold-war rhetoric about the threat of "a hostile ideology global in scope, atheistic in character, ruthless in purpose, and insidious in method." The conflict with communism, he avowed, "commands our whole attention, absorbs our very beings," and it was a conflict that promised "to be of indefinite duration."

The difficulty with this view is that the formation of the military-industrial complex antedated the cold war (the Pentagon was built in the early 1940s, when the Soviet Union was an ally) and has continued to prosper in its wake. Ledbetter reports that military spending under Barack Obama is "more than a trillion dollars a year, significantly higher in constant dollars than during the Cold War period, the Vietnam

War, or the Reagan-era buildup." Military spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product has been rising in the last decade and is now at 7 percent, near where it was in the late 1970s.

The origins and persistence of the national security state and of the military-industrial complex, which is among its essential components, lie not in the cold war but in the American quest for global hegemony, of which the cold war was but a long and pivotal episode. World War II witnessed the beginnings of the displacement of limited conceptions of "national defense" with a breathtakingly expansive notion of "national security," which entails a global projection of American power and has consequently required vast military expenditures. Today the United States does not merely spend more than any other nation on its military; it spends more than all other nations combined on its military.

Three days after Eisenhower's farewell address, the new president, John F. Kennedy, delivered his inaugural address, a speech at least as memorable. If Eisenhower worried ambivalently over the military-industrial complex's threat to liberty, Kennedy asserted without ambivalence that liberty and the project for the preponderance of American power were mutually reinforcing. "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill," Kennedy declared, "that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

Or at least we would do all these things to assure the survival and the success of the empire for liberty, the Pax Americana, that both Eisenhower and Kennedy envisioned and that spawned the military-industrial complex—if not the survival and success of the republican liberty of which Washington spoke.