

50 years after Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex" speech

Assessing the National Security State

On January 17, 1961, President Dwight David Eisenhower delivered the most famous speech of his storied career. In a televised farewell address to the American people, Eisenhower warned of the burdens imposed by a large, and seemingly permanent, military establishment, something that the nation had managed to avoid for most of its history. He charged his countrymen to be on guard against a "military-industrial complex" acquiring "unwarranted influence" in the halls of power.

By any objective measure, efforts to control the expansion of the military-industrial complex have failed. In inflation-adjusted terms, Americans will spend more than twice as much on national security in 2011 than they did during Eisenhower's final year in office—without a large, nuclear-armed adversary to justify the cost. These spending patterns persist in large measure because of the influence of interested parties who derive enormous benefits from the maintenance of a permanent arms industry.

Five decades after Eisenhower's prescient remarks, the Cato Institute convened a conference of analysts and scholars to discuss how the evolution of the military-industrial complex has conformed to his vision, and what might be done about it.

The event opened with remarks from Susan Eisenhower, chairman emeritus of the Eisenhower Institute and granddaughter of the past president. She discussed how the speech underscored "the transformational times in which Dwight Eisenhower served as president," noting that "there is a contemporary resonance to this speech because we are today also living in transformational times."

Some of the most acrimonious debates within the Eisenhower administration pitted the president against his former colleagues in the uniformed services. Eisenhower's attempts to adapt military force structure to a new national security strategy became highly politicized and ultimately failed. Eisenhower was especially worried that future presidents, lacking his military credentials and deep knowledge of national security matters, would be even less willing and able to con-



SUSAN EISENHOWER (above left), chairman emeritus of the Eisenhower Institute and granddaughter of the president and **JOHN C. HULSMAN** (above right), senior research fellow at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, discuss the military-industrial complex. **CHRISTOPHER PREBLE**, Cato's director of foreign policy studies, speaks during a panel which featured (left to right) **CHARLES J. DUNLAP, JR.**, Maj. Gen., USAF (Ret.); **LAWRENCE KORB**, assistant secretary of defense under President Reagan and now senior fellow at the Center for American Progress; and **LAWRENCE WILKERSON**, former top aide to Secretary of State Colin Powell.

front the military. Was he right? Can a commander-in-chief lacking military experience prevail over uniformed officers who are national figures in their own right?

Three former military officers discussed the complex interplay between civilian leaders and Pentagon brass throughout the last five decades and offered suggestions for improving civil-military relations. Retired Air Force major general Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., stressed the need to circumscribe the military's influence, especially over domestic issues. "Is it a good thing that the armed forces are more trusted than the Supreme Court?" he said. "Is it a good thing that the armed forces are more trusted than the Congress? Is that a good thing for democracy?" Lawrence Korb, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, noted the difficulty civilians face in arguing with decorated military officers. "But it's important to be able to challenge them," he said. Lawrence Wilkerson, a top assistant to Secretary of State Colin Powell, discussed the imbalance between the influence of America's military and its diplomatic efforts. "Diplomacy should be the lead-

ing instrument. It should be the instrument most coveted by leadership," he said. But instead, that role falls to the Department of Defense. "That is the greatest and starkest imbalance of power within the civil and military relationship that I know of."

Eisenhower noted that the "conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry [was] new in the American experience." Though he believed that such an establishment was necessary at a time when the United States was confronting an ambitious nuclear-armed adversary, he nonetheless worried about its long-term effects on the nation's economy and politics. Since then, however, much of the Pentagon's budget has served as a thinly veiled jobs program that has created powerful, entrenched political constituencies who oppose reductions in military spending even in peacetime. Given the political and economic realities, what are the prospects for restraining military spending and reorienting the nation's force structure?

Video of the conference is available at www.cato.org. ■