

## **The Elephant in the Room**

by David McReynolds

One of the remarkable things about the United States is that, aside from the blunt words of the late President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, there has been so little concern with the profound militarization of this country.

Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea.

Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now . . . we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions.

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 all involved, so is the very nature 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

**(Excerpts from the address by President Dwight D. Eisenhower on leaving office, 1960)**

Historically the United States was virtually demilitarized. It established an undefended border with both Canada and Mexico very early, and has the natural protection of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. There was a huge military machine constructed from scratch when the Civil War began, but it vanished almost completely in the aftermath, being revived only briefly during the Spanish American War.

The US entered World War I in a state of disarmament, and proceeded to largely dismantle that military during the 1920's. That is our history - a nation that certainly got into wars which weren't necessary (WW I) or where the intent was clearly imperial (the Spanish American War). The lack of enemies on our borders gave us a unique approach to the military - we never maintained a large standing army.

That changed with World War II, which saw the United States emerge as the strongest single power in the world, the only nuclear power, a nation undamaged by the war, in contrast to Europe and Asia, where devastation lay heavy on the land, factories, transportation and housing in ruin.

Something else had happened - the world was in the process of a vast anti-colonial revolution in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America at exactly the same time as the Soviet Union emerged, bloodied but willing to offer ideological support to that revolutionary process. It was in fear of this spreading tide of revolution that the Cold War began in 1947.

At the present time 54% of our income taxes go for the military. (18% for past military, which includes veteran s benefits and interest on the national debt created by military spending, and 36% for current military costs, including Afghanistan). The figures the government uses are different and deceptive - they insist only 20% of the budget is for what they call defense spending. But the government figures are inaccurate because they do not include the interest on the national debt or the care of the veterans.

The US spends about \$500 billions a year on the military. This is more than the next fifteen nations combined: China, Russia, Britain, France, Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, India, Brazil, Italy, Australia, Canada, Indonesia and the Netherlands. (Source: Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation - armscontrolcenter.org.)

We have several hundred military bases scattered across the globe, none of them needed for our defense. Not all of those \$500 billion and all those bases were able to stop the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11. The dangers of terrorism are quite real (and a direct result of the US involvement in the Middle East and Afghanistan) but our security actually would be increased if we withdrew our forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and closed our military bases in the Middle East.

Note how, in an Orwellian way, politicians talk of defense spending, when they mean military spending. In the whole of the recent struggle over Don t Ask, Don t Tell , we overlooked just what admission of homosexuals to the military would mean - more bodies for imperial wars. I am glad whenever a boundary on human rights falls but I must hope that gays do not now rush to join the military but rather, support efforts to bring straight men and women home from foreign wars.

Since the end of the Second World War, in 1945, the United States has not suffered a direct attack on its territories at any time, yet it has been involved in military interventions in Asia (the Korean and Indochinese wars and Afghanistan), Latin America (Panama), and the Middle East (Lebanon and Iraq). And it has, through the CIA, been directly involved in coups and assassinations across the planet.

Let me quote Eisenhower again, since whatever else he may have been, he was hardly a pacifist or a socialist, on the contrary, he served as the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the European Theater of war. Earlier, on April 16 of 1953, he said:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists and the hopes of its children . . . This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

The broad movement for peace and social justice of which all socialists are a part, has somehow lost that fierce anti-military stand expressed so well by Bertolt Brecht, when he wrote:

I am not only a pacifist but a militant pacifist. I am willing to fight for peace. Nothing will end war unless the people themselves refuse to go to war.

In the early days of the revolutionary movement for socialism, it had seemed there could be only one kind of war - that of imperialism. It was a betrayal of our movement that the narrow forces of nationalism destroyed the Second International, leaving most of the socialist parties to give support to the first World War. Things were certainly more confused when many on the left felt that the Soviet State was a worker's state which needed nuclear weapons. And I admit - for consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds - that while I would not have fought in World War II, it was a war for which I still have no answer (though the fact is that the war reduced all sides barbarism). I do not know what I would have done in Vietnam, for I feel that if there was a just war, it was that of the Vietnamese against the Americans, or earlier, the war in Spain against Franco.

But I know that militarism is the enemy of freedom, the enforced conformity of marching troops undermines that free will which is essential to democracy. I know - as did most of the generals who actually saw combat (in contrast to the politicians from Nixon through Clinton to Obama, who never saw combat) that war itself is the enemy, one which, in the nuclear age must be ended. (I remember during the height of the Cold War, when the slogan better dead than red was on the lips of the right wing, and there was casual talk of nuking the Soviet Union, that these folks, most of them devout Christians, did not realize that a nuclear war would have done what Stalin had failed to do - destroy Christianity in Russia. Today some of the neo-cons who urge nuclear war against Iran fail to see that such a war would achieve what Hitler failed to achieve - the annihilation of all the Jewish people).

If the United States cut the military budget in half, if it totally abolished the CIA, if it closed every military base beyond our borders, our security would be greater than it is now when we live in fear of terrorism, and when we welcome each step toward a more totalitarian state as necessary for our protection.

In the not-so-distant past, the peace and socialist movements were virtually one and the same. It is time for us to help once more forge that unity. And we, a key part of the socialist movement in this country, have a special and proud history, for it was Eugene Victor Debs who refused support for the first World War, and as penalty for that was sent to prison. It is this tradition of militant anti-militarism we need we affirm.