

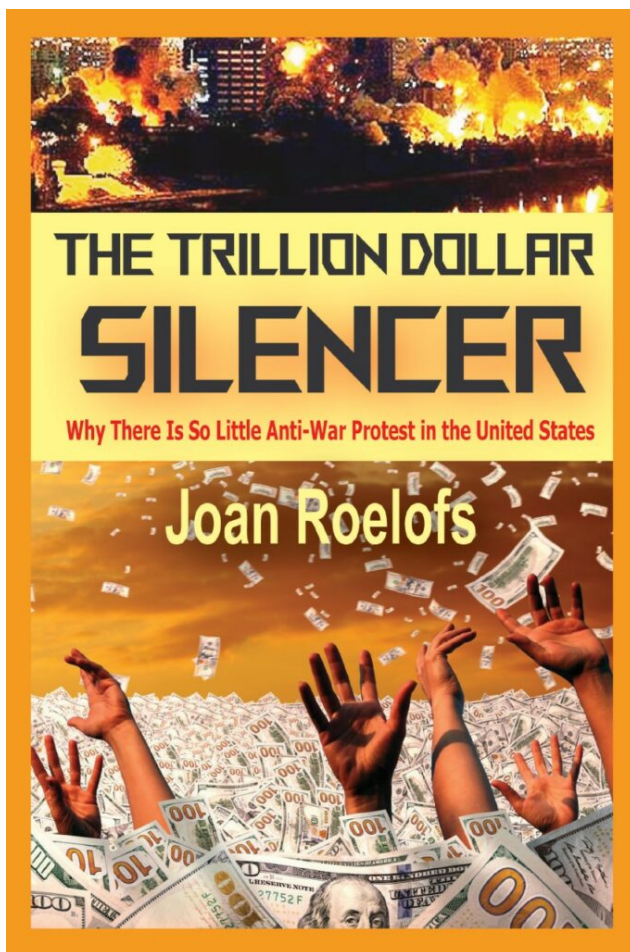


- Campaign Nonviolence

IKE WAS RIGHT: THE US MILITARY BUDGET IS ‘A THEFT FROM THOSE WHO HUNGER’

A new book proves the prescience of Eisenhower’s defense spending warning, while also showing its chilling effect on anti-war protest.

Arnie Alpert February 3, 2023



Back in 2022, when Congress was still a somewhat functional branch of government, our senators and representatives concluded their work by approving a **\$1.7 trillion budget**, with \$797.7 billion, a 52 percent share, allocated to what is known on Capitol Hill as “Defense.”

The massive military appropriation, \$69.3 billion above the previous year’s massive appropriation, included \$172.7 billion for 1,316,944 active-duty military personnel and 770,400 reservists. It included \$278.1 billion for operations and maintenance of military facilities. The budget set aside \$162.2 billion for procurement, i.e. new weapons, such as aircraft, ships, and tanks. “Procurement,” though, doesn’t include development of new

weapons. That's covered under "Research, Development, Test and Evaluation," with \$136.7 billion for such programs as the Army's Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon, "modernization" of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, and the new B-21 bomber designed to carry nuclear weapons to their targets.

Billions more are tucked away in the Defense budget for health care, disaster relief, drug interdiction, and aid to Ukraine. All told, the U.S. military budget is comparable to the entire economy of a medium-sized country, say Turkey, which had a GDP of \$819 billion in 2021.

Left out of the appropriation bill were funds needed for goals such as ending homelessness, providing affordable higher education, and replacing fossil fuels with renewables. The words of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, spoken early in his first term, come to mind: "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."

Eisenhower was right.

"In the councils of government," Eisenhower warned eight years later, "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."

And persist it has.

A disastrous rise of misplaced power

Now, sixty-one years down the road, Joan Roelofs repeats and elaborates on Eisenhower's warning. Where Eisenhower's words were brief and prophetic, Roelofs' are more comprehensive, something like a catalog of a system so immense that it poisons democracy and silences dissent at all levels of society. It's "a labyrinthine array of organizations, departments, agencies, boards, and partnerships involving government, industry, universities, and nonprofits," an "insecurity blanket" so thick it crushes nearly all resistance.

Roelofs calls it the "Trillion Dollar Silencer." And in the words of its subtitle, the book seeks to explain "Why There Is So Little Anti-War Protest in the United States."

Roelofs' catalog begins with what she calls "the military establishment," that is, the physical and human infrastructure for conventional and unconventional war-making. It starts with the millions of service members and civilians in the Defense Department, operating at thousands of locations in the United States and around the world. Then there are millions more who work under contract or for entities operating under DOD contracts.

The book provides illustrative details, such as the abundance of military academies and colleges, training centers, research agencies, and DOD-sponsored programs at public and private universities. Some are well known, like West Point. Others are obscure, such as the Pentagon's Entertainment Media Office, which boasts of assisting production of more than 500 films since 1947, and the Soldier Systems Center, a division of the Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine, which is developing pizza that can remain "shelf-stable" for three years at temperatures up to 80 degrees.

Military bases present a great example of the system's impact. "Reminiscent of company towns," Roelofs writes, "bases are the economic hubs of their regions, fostering economic development in a multitude of ways. Military personnel and civilian employees are customers for car rentals, supermarkets, restaurants, entertainment,

department stores—the whole suburban mall scene.” Personnel and their families who live off-base stimulate local real estate markets, which Roelofs reports include hotel-motel chains “which offer housekeeping suites specifically for military families.” It’s not hard to see why local realtors, waitresses, and supermarket clerks in such communities might be reluctant to raise their voices in opposition to militarism.

State and local governments can be boosters of militarism, too. In New Hampshire, which both Roelofs and I call home, the state’s office of economic development sponsors the [NH Aerospace and Defense Consortium](#), which promotes arms exports, a sector in which the United States is world leader.

Pawns of the MIC

Another case in point is the Defense Department’s Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration, or REPI, Program, which Roelofs says is geared toward making sure environmental complications don’t interfere with military training or weapons testing. To that end, REPI doles out big bucks to fund partnerships with environmental groups. For example, at Fort Benning, Georgia, “live-fire and other training was threatened by threatened species and their habitats. Now the base and its partners are restoring habitat and offering contiguous land for buyers who would use the land for recreation. Among the partners are the Georgia Land Trust, The Conservation Fund, the Alabama Land Trust, and The Nature Conservancy, or TNC. Although actual conservation occurs, the projects incur entanglements, economic and reputational, between civilian conservation associations and the military.”

“This can further silence the environmental movement, which rarely refers to the military’s role in the devastation of the earth,” Roelofs comments.

When we consider the military-industrial complex, or MIC, our thoughts are likely to go quickly to the companies which make and sell weapons. “In Fiscal Year 2020, DOD obligated more money on federal contracts (\$420 billion in current dollars) than all other government agencies combined,” according to the Congressional Research Service. Five corporations — Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, General Dynamics, and Northrop Grumman – accounted for 54 percent of the total.

Weapons makers are such an accepted part of picture that they sometimes slide into near invisibility. Consider the massive shipments of arms sent to Ukraine. A January *New York Times* article reported another \$2.5 billion in arms and equipment to be exported to Ukraine, including Stryker Combat Vehicles and Bradley Fighting Vehicles. The article makes no mention of who will pocket the \$2.5 billion. (For the record, Strykers are made by General Dynamics, Bradleys by BAE.) Likewise, a January BBC article, “Ukraine weapons: What military equipment is the world giving?” has some nice graphics depicting Patriot missiles, Himar Rocket Launchers, and more, but makes no mention of the manufacturers. It’s what Roelofs would call “a vast silence.”

And it’s not just the big weapons makers that profit from selling goods and services to the Pentagon, but countless small businesses, as well. Roelofs cites a 2018 *New York Times* article which “noted that Granite Industries of Vermont in Barre ‘makes 3,500 to 4,000 headstones a year for Arlington [National Cemetery] — a steady line of business in a town that has seen its stonework fortunes decline over time.’”

Roelofs, who spent her career as a political science professor, is particularly harsh on partnerships between the war machine and academia. Acknowledging the strength of campus anti-war sentiment during the US war in Vietnam, she asserts that in succeeding decades, “Protest against war, empire, and capitalism was channeled, with major assistance from foundation funding, into identity politics and featured single issue nongovernmental organizations. Universities had become used to the juicy contracts, enabling the construction of new facilities

and new hires. Students were attracted to the well-funded departments and programs, which became even more attractive when heavy student loan debt became the norm.” By and large, silence took the place of noisy anti-war activism on campus, especially in fields related to international relations, she says.

Closely allied with the academic world are foreign policy think tanks, many of which have close links to the weapons industry. For example, citing its 2016 annual report, Roelofs ties the pro-interventionist agenda of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to its donations from the likes of NATO, the DOD, and Lockheed Martin.

“Military contractor philanthropy serves more than merely to improve public relations and silence the boards, staffs, donors, clients, and patrons of recipient NGOs; it enables corporations to shape the content of culture,” Roelofs writes. “Many scholarships, internships, and joint programs, especially in the STEM subjects, are funded by weapons makers.” Roelofs cites BAE, which has a major presence in southern New Hampshire and which provides scholarships for a Summer STEM Scholars Program at the state university. “Instead of democratically determined curricula, programs, and scholarships, the MIC does it their way,” says Roelofs. Even groups like the ACLU and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights benefit from military contractor largesse, Roelofs says. And it’s not exactly philanthropy, but we should not ignore the generous contributions weapons contractors make to Congressional candidates and the vast sums they spend on lobbying Congress.

On the whole Roelofs makes a compelling and well-documented case in answer to her own question, why is there so little anti-war protest in the United States? But at times I wondered if her arguments were a bit too sweeping. For example, she states, “The focus of even the most committed SRI [Social Responsible Investing] investors — generally churches — has changed, yet the MIC and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) producers are rarely targeted.” Roelofs is correct in her assessment of the United Church of Christ’s (UCC) pension fund, which restricts investments in gambling, tobacco, fossil fuels, and small arms, but not the major weapons producers. According to the fund’s 2022 [third quarter report](#), it does invest in such firms as Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and Lockheed Martin. But its holdings don’t seem to have deterred the UCC from becoming a major supporter of the Back From The Brink nuclear abolition campaign. Nor has it kept the church from backing the Poor People’s Campaign and its call for a \$350 billion a year cut in military spending. The UCC is not silent.

“Military contractors are awash in funds for philanthropy,” which Roelofs says “reaches and silences citizens” and “endows a large cohort that might otherwise be inclined to antiwar activism.” Among her examples of groups benefiting from such donations are the Chicago Jazz Orchestra, Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Houston. Perhaps my own ambitions have been dulled from too many years in the peace/disarmament trenches, but why would anyone look to Houston’s Gilbert and Sullivan Society as an ally of the anti-war movement under any circumstances?

Other claims are a bit too glib or thinly documented. Writing about DOD funding of humanitarian relief groups, including the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, and Mercy Corp, Roelofs writes, “Grantees are expected to be silent about any related military objectives and operations.” But the only example she cites is from a researcher who interviewed aid workers in Bosnia in 1996 and Haiti in 1997. I need to know a bit more or at least see some more recent examples. Her argument that even some pro-disarmament groups, specifically Physicians for Social Responsibility, don’t focus on weapons-making corporations due to their foundation support is based on an article published in 1985. Perhaps PSR’s current support for the Don’t Bank of the Bomb campaign could serve as a counterexample.

Roelofs also recycles exaggerated accusations that Gene Sharp, nonviolent theorist and founder of the Albert Einstein Institution, was a willful agent of American imperialism. The evidence? Apparently when he was in graduate school in 1965, he was recruited into an institute at Harvard where prominent Cold Warriors were centered. Later, with funding from groups tied to the MIC (the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy), Sharp backed movements trying to topple governments to which the U.S. was hostile.

I don't buy the argument. I'm persuaded more by a 2008 "open letter" initiated by Stephen Zunes and signed by dozens of activists and scholars known for their deep anti-militarist commitments, which referred to the allegations as "groundless." "Rather than being a tool of imperialism, Dr. Sharp's research and writings have inspired generations of progressive peace, labor, feminist, human rights, environmental, and social justice activists in the United States and around the world," the letter states, and adds, "As with similar false charges which have recently appeared regarding the work of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, the Center for Applied Nonviolent Actions and Strategies, and similar groups, critics confuse the Albert Einstein Institution's willingness to provide generic information on the history and dynamics of strategic nonviolent action with nefarious efforts by the U.S. government to undermine foreign governments critical of U.S. hegemonic goals and neoliberal economic policies."

Roelofs' treatment of the environmental movement raises important questions. The U.S. military, after all, is the world's largest consumer of fossil fuels. Wouldn't it make sense for groups like the Sunrise Movement and 350.org to be visible among organizations calling for reductions in the military budget to drive down the size of the Navy and Air Force? I can't find them or any major Green groups among the U.S. participants in the Global Days of Action on Military Spending. With regard to the realities of modern warfare, especially the growing threat of nuclear conflict, it's hard to imagine anything more destructive to the natural environment. Yet, few (exceptions being the Sierra Club, Environmentalists Against War, Union of Concerned Scientists) American environmental groups are among the partners of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Some groups, such as The Nature Conservancy, may be on the take from the Pentagon. But what accounts for the others? Have they been silenced? Or are they just silent?

Perhaps, as Roelofs asserts, the too-big-to-measure influence of the military machine has silenced most of civil society. But don't we need to look more closely to see what other factors may be at work? After all, as Roelofs notes, there was a large and effective anti-militarist movement in the 1960s and '70s, when the MIC was hardly powerless. A mass movement in the 1980s blunted the impact of U.S. military aggression in Central America at the height of Reagan's presidency. Where did these movements go? Did foundations and big donors issue subtle or direct instructions that recipients of their charity needed to keep out of the streets? How come there was a massive movement that forced the U.S. military to largely withdraw its forces from Iraq, but relative silence regarding the longer war in Afghanistan? Can peace movement demobilization in the post-Bush/Cheney period be explained by MIC influence? If well-meaning people and progressive activists believe they have little room for anti-militarism on their agendas, is it because they are bought off? Distracted? Don't know survival is at stake? I would welcome further inquiry.

Roelofs writes in her conclusion, "Those who see the necessity of change for planetary survival, justice, and sanity need to become aware of all the ways that the military-industrial-congressional-almost everything-complex is being sustained." I would suggest, in addition, that the pro-peace and anti-militarism movement needs to change if we want all those people who believe in survival, sanity, and justice to join forces with us. The answers may lie more in strategy than mastery of the facts. But in the meantime, Joan Roelofs has done a tremendous service and raised important questions.

“If we could divert the same trillions the government is already injecting into the economy to civilian purposes,” Roelofs’ final sentence states, “we could repair the environment, provide everyone a fine standard of living, and work for peace on earth.” That is no exaggeration.

This story was produced by [Campaign Nonviolence](#)

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CAMPAIGN NONVIOLENCE

Campaign Nonviolence, a project of Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service, is working for a new culture of nonviolence by connecting the issues to end war, poverty, racism and environmental destruction. We organize The Nonviolent Cities Project and the annual Campaign Nonviolence Week of Actions.

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