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War seems to have attracted more scholarly interest through the years than virtually any other subject. Amazon lists upwards of 50,000 books for sale on World War II alone.¹ Vastly under-covered, on the other hand, has been the business of war—how its forces have been supplied, through what systems, by whom and at what cost.²

Benjamin Franklin Cooling has done a service to the profession by training his attention for decades on this much-neglected topic. Most of his scholarship as a professor at the National Defense University has focused on the American Civil War,³ but in 1977 he broadened his lens with the time-honored *War, Business and American Society: Historical Perspectives on the Military Industrial Complex.*⁴ His new book, *Arming America Through the Centuries: War, Business, and Building a National Security State,* is an update of that work, covering the subsequent developments of the military buildup of President Ronald Reagan, the end of the Cold War, and the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001. The evolving business entanglements of war that he chronicles have created a United States that he says is more Sparta than Athens, that is, a national security state.

From the early chapters, Colling provides evidence of the postwar features of the military industrial complex during earlier centuries of the American republic. The contractors’ practice of spreading pieces of their military contracts widely across the American landscape in order to build political protection against budget cuts notably intensified during the post-Cold War period. Yet Cooling shows that this strategy’s history dates back to the American Revolution, noting that President George Washington chose to disperse naval

construction to six “politically sensitive” locations (29). When Cooling gets to the Civil War, he likewise describes the construction of prewar navy frigates “spread across key installations, as much for political purposes, as for technical proficiency” (47).

Cost overruns in military contracting have ballooned in this century—the F-35 fighter jet program being the most notorious example. But they, too, can be traced to the nation’s early days, and to the complexities of time delays and procurement challenges deriving in part from multiple construction locations. Cooling writes that the United States’ first three frigates, which were built in 1798, cost more than the budget for six of them, with a cost overrun of what was then a lot of government money—an estimated $450,000.

Also baked into American history is the use of military justifications for domestic investments. Cooling’s point that following the War of 1812 Senators John Calhoun and Daniel Webster “linked national security with development of internal improvements, notably canals and roads, fostering domestic cotton and woolen manufacture” (37) is reminiscent of President Dwight Eisenhower’s push for a National Security Highway System. The practice of using arms sales overseas to tide US military producers over the downtimes likewise turns up during the same time. Cooling mentions the “disposal of obsolete stock from American armories and arsenals through sales to Latin American clients for their own revolutionary wars” (43). He further notes the creative practices of waste and fraud cropping up in every war he examines, as well as in between them.

Cooling invalidates the notion that the cost-maximizing arrangement of “cost-plus” contracts (guaranteeing that the costs of manufacturing a weapons system would be covered by the government, with an agreed profit on top) was an invention of President Franklin Roosevelt’s strategy to lure private industry into converting its operations to supply the World War II effort. Cooling shows the practice alive and well in World War I (144). This arrangement helped induce financier Bernard Baruch to head up the War Industries Board, for example, and Charles Schwab of Bethlehem Steel to lead the Emergency Fleet Corporation.

The story Cooling tells is a mixture of old and new. Of more recent vintage is the creation after the Second World War of what he calls “a militarized, hegemonic America” resting largely on “an entrepreneurial defense industrial base, large standing military force,” and “laughingly obscene national security (much less defense) budget” (xii). Eisenhower of course used his farewell address to coin the term for the force behind all of this, the Military Industrial Complex. Calling it the Military Industrial Political Complex (MIPC), Cooling adds the critical element of politics that Eisenhower diplomatically chose to leave out, and notes that in largely ignoring their president’s warning, the American public acceded to “the insidious and ubiquitous presence of a vast spectrum” and “hierarchy of arms and services, public and private enterprise” that “has integrated the nation’s evolution” (xiv).

He also gives space to the opposing view, which is influential in Washington and propagated by defense-industry-funded think tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, that this force has created “a qualitative military edge,” hampered mainly by excessive regulations “choking the system” (xiii). He also records the contractors’ remarkable lament that the business is short-changed because “the defense industry is not sitting at the table when hard budget choices are made in the Pentagon” (xiii). His book, though, provides a compendium of the ways in which business has always called too many of the shots.

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8 https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-national-highway-act
In the column of relatively new developments is the American way of financing US wars without requiring sacrifices from the American populace. As Cooling observes, Reagan pioneered the practice of financing his military buildup with debt, rather than through war taxes (220-229). Subsequent presidents have followed suit, though only the Republican presidents have simultaneously cut taxes while boosting unpaid-for military spending.

The book’s historical sweep affords the opportunity to see the current features of the MIPC in development across American history, and to tour its twists and turns along the way. Cooling is an expert on this huge subject and pulls together an extraordinary range of material into one place. The drive to cover this vast material, however, has resulted in a book that proceeds at what often feels like a breakneck pace. Thumbnail summaries of major developments and piles of facts and figures are hurled through, quickly moving on to the next. Interpretation frequently comes down to stringing together competing quotations from other scholars with no attempt to weigh them. Theories are often presented in such shorthand fashion that understanding them would clearly require going to the cited texts themselves.

Occasionally the torrid pace infects the construction of sentences themselves. For example, we read that “How [technology historians Barton and Margaret] Hacker and Vining see it, arrangements made to exploit research in World War II permanently transformed relations …” and encounter puzzling constructions like “Subsumed within friction between rulers in the Old World and colonists in the New, emerged irrepressible questions” (3). It is apparent that thorough editing and copy-editing have likewise been sacrificed, perhaps to the pace of production. There are a surprising number of identification errors (Nobel prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz is named Joseph Steinmetz several times (242), US Congressman John Murtha becomes Jim Murtha (309), television host Rachel Maddow becomes Rachel Maddox (249), US Secretary of Defense William Cohen becomes Warren Cohen (263), and Brown University’s Cost of War project becomes the Brown University Eisenhower Study Group (296)).

The book does not linger long on the dissenters from the MIPC’s growing power. Cooling does note the “surprisingly modernist refrain” during the 1846–1848 Mexican War by transcendentalist Theodore Parker, who decried that the “War, wasting a nation’s wealth, depresses the great mass of the people” but “serves to elevate a few to opulence and power,” and called out the lucrative positions of army contractors “when they chanced to be the favourites (sic) of the party in power” (49, comment in the original). Cooling gives short shrift to serious efforts at reform through the years. He does mention various “revolutions in military affairs” that left power structures unchanged and military budgets that continued to rise. He allocates one sentence in the book to the citizens who have advocated “shifting money from defense to public infrastructure projects and social programs” (291).

The historical moment that held the most promise for changing the trajectory of rising MIPC power occurred with the implosion of the Soviet Union. It was a moment when the nation could have invested its defense savings in creating new peaceful economic foundations. The US military budget was cut by a third and the procurement budget, which fed military contractors, was cut by two-thirds. Cooling sketches the outlines of the government programs that were put in place to create a soft landing for defense-dependent businesses, workers, and communities. He also discusses the government incentives for the major contractors to merge with each other. While the intent was to reduce post-Cold War excess capacity in the industry, the effect, as

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11 Greg Bischak, “US after the Cold War: 1990-1997” (Bonn: Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies); Miriam Pemberton, Six Stops on the National Security Tour: Rethinking Warfare Economics (London: Routledge) 2022
he says, was to consolidate, and therefore expand, the power of the remaining Big Five.\textsuperscript{12} He does not mention that eighty-five percent of the savings from military budget cuts was allocated to deficit reduction, rather than to investments that might have created what economists refer to as “demand-pull” to alternative industries.\textsuperscript{13} The result was a concerted, and successful, effort by defense contractors to avoid new civilian ventures and turn the military budget back on its upward climb.

At the end of his book Cooling tours the features of the current MIPC’s excessive power and asks, “Can we do anything about it?” (xv, 317-338). While the question is rhetorical, his implicit answer is to pull together in one place a trove of information about this force in American life. Certainly this is a necessary first step: US citizens cannot hope to rein in the MIPC’s hold on its institutions and economic foundations without understanding its growth and development, and its ways and means. Cooling has opened up the territory for a wealth of future investigations. What he has provided, mostly in shorthand form, is waiting to be sorted out, examined with more depth and clarity, and with the benefit of future historical distance.

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\textsuperscript{12} The Big Five defense contractors are Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing Company, General Dynamics, and Northrop Grumman.