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Arms production and defense companies are back in the public spotlight. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine and rising geopolitical tensions have boosted governments’ demand for arms and prompted concerns for supply-chain and production capacity.¹ A recent analysis by The Financial Times found that, despite “swelling" backlogs, “the order books of the world’s biggest defense companies are near record highs.”² But this is not simply a story of supply and demand; it also illustrates the ongoing and close relationship between governments and defense firms. Soon after the invasion, top US Defense Department officials met with major US defense executives, pushing them to ramp up production and investment.³ Initially, however, not all of these executives were convinced that their interests aligned with the Pentagon, and some reportedly worried that they would end up burdened with excess wares.⁴ Congress later made possible more multiyear defense spending commitments, “a provision that industry lobbyists have long pushed for, arguing it gives companies certainty that investments they make to start production will see continued returns in future years.”⁵ Is this evidence of a military-industrial complex (MIC), and, if so, what are the consequences for US politics and security?

Joanna Spear’s new book, The Business of Armaments, thus arrives at a particularly relevant time for such discussions about the relationship between the state and the defense industry. Based on meticulous and extensive research from industry and government archives, Spear’s book examines arms industry-state relations in Great Britain from 1855 to 1955. Her analysis focuses on the emergence, evolution, survival strategies, and government relations of two of the most prominent British armament companies of the time, Armstrongs and Vickers, which later merged and components of which today persist in BAE Systems. Spear argues that “the British government always preserved a distance from both Armstrongs and Vickers and consistently worked solely in its own interests,” concluding that “the argument for a British [MIC] fails for the firms and periods covered in this book” (351). More specifically, she finds that the interests of the two companies often diverged from those of the government, over which their influence was often minimal. Instead, they pursued independent foreign and domestic policies in order to ensure their survival, which was threatened by deeply rooted government resistance in this period to assisting them. The analysis itself is divided between the firms’ efforts to sell to the British government (the first empirical section) and its pursuit of arms sales abroad (the second empirical section).

The Business of Armaments stands out as a rare pre-Cold War and non-US account of arms industry-state relations at a crucial period in world politics and the development of internationalized arms markets. It is at once detailed in its approach to historical evidence and covers a broad scope of time during which state-industry relations evolved dramatically. In doing so, the book also pushes scholars to think more carefully and concretely about what empirical evidence counts for or against the existence of an MIC in a specific time and place.

place, and what it means for private companies to exercise power in and over domestic and foreign policy. The excellent contributions to this roundtable from both historians and political scientists all engage in these discussions, highlighting both the importance of Spear’s work and the tensions in it.

Mary Barton calls *The Business of Armaments* a “compelling account” and notes its contributions to multiple secondary literatures in diplomatic history and international relations. Her review then focuses on three empirical questions: first, whether firms’ priorities changed over the course of the century examined; second, about the use of financial intelligence and intelligence sharing; and third, how foreign governments and firms viewed the relationships between Armstrongs, Vickers, and the British government. Barton notes that those perceptions “had real-world implications” and shaped how American companies “aired their grievances against American administrations for failing to support their economic interests and in contrast to foreign governments.”

Neil Cooper highlights Spear’s “original and detailed” examination of Armstrongs, Vickers, and their differing strategies as an “impressive contribution” to the literature on the arms trade. However, he discusses two “slight quibbles” with her analysis, which are related to the treatment of government arms export policy, including in relation to “the spaces of Empire,” and to the treatment of the “MIC question.” Cooper’s quibbles may be slight by his telling, but they are important historical and conceptual questions with which he nevertheless engages substantively. He ultimately argues that what Spear demonstrates is “a gradually emerging British MIC, rather than a blanket rejection of the argument for an MIC.”

Sean Seyer praises *The Business of Armaments* as a “meticulous history” that supports its analysis of Armstrongs’s and Vickers’s struggle to survive with extensive archival research and “a wide breadth of secondary sources.” He notes that it will “surely be of interest to scholars of business history, policy history, the history of technology, and, to an extent, international relations.” Yet he also, most centrally, suggests that Spear has limited the reach of her claims about the British MIC by focusing only on the two companies and by eschewing a clear working definition of an MIC.

Anna Stavrianakis finds Spear’s book “fruitful for thinking about the history of relations between the state and arms capital and the operation of British power on the world stage” and draws comparisons between the past the book describes and present debates about British arms exports in light of wars in Ukraine and Yemen. She is surprised, however, by “the absence of any explicit discussion of Britain as an empire,” either conceptually or empirically in terms of the firms’ involvement in maintaining it. Like others, she also questions Spear’s conclusions on the “MIC question.” Stravrianakis provides a historical discussion that sheds light on these issues, bringing into focus conceptual and empirical questions about British imperial power and state-industry relations.

In her response, Spear not only addresses substantive questions raised by the reviewers—specifically, about the British MIC, the role of empire, and the intelligence activities of the firms—but also brings to the table methodological discussions about how to measure concepts and interpret archival evidence. This latter discussion makes for especially fascinating reading. Spear compares her expectations when she first went into the archives to her actual findings, and explains why she thinks her conclusions about the lack of evidence for a British MIC in this period are accurate. In the heart of her response, she engages in a systematic discussion of the MIC concept in light of the British experience in this period, using a typology adapted from Bruce
Benton, 6 provides some insight on the role of these firms in the British empire, and ends with points about firms’ intelligence activities that might seed future scholarly research, especially as records are declassified.

Overall, the reviewers present insightful and deeply substantive commentary on Spear’s work, marshaling their own impressive historical expertise to add to the conversation, and Spear responds in kind. It is an exchange worth reading, one which recommends The Business of Armaments for anyone interested in gaining greater understanding about the important but often hidden politics of arms industry-state relations in international politics and diplomacy.

Contributors:

Joanna Spear, PhD, is a Research Professor of International Affairs and Principal Investigator for the Department of Defense-funded FAO Regional Skill Sustainment Initiative at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University. During 2023–24 she is a Woodrow Wilson International Scholar at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC. There she is working on a project on the foreign policies of Moderna, Pfizer and AstraZeneca as they negotiated with governments over vaccines against COVID-19.

Jennifer L. Erickson is an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Boston College and the author of Dangerous Trade: Arms Exports, Human Rights, and International Reputation (Columbia, 2015). She is also the managing editor of the Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum (RJISSF). Her research interests include the conventional arms trade, international security and arms control, and the laws and norms of war. She received her PhD in Government from Cornell University and has completed fellowships at Dartmouth College and Stanford University.

Mary Barton is an analyst with the US Government. She is the author of Counterterrorism Between the Wars: An International History, 1919–1937 (Oxford University Press, 2020). She received her PhD from the University of Virginia, and completed postdoctoral fellowships at the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, SAIS, and the Dickey Center, Dartmouth College. She is currently writing a history on the origins of Five Eyes.

Neil Cooper is Director of the School of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kent State University. He has published widely on aspects of the arms trade and arms control and is editor of a new book series to be published by Lynne Rienner, Studies in Technology and Security: Innovation, Impact and Governance.

Sean Seyer is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Kansas and author of Sovereign Skies: The Origins of American Civil Aviation Policy (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021). His current book project focuses on how charges of monopoly and conspiracy shaped the American aircraft industry and procurement policy from the Wright Brothers’ first flight through the early Cold War.

Anna Stavrianakis is Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex, where she researches and teaches on the arms trade, militarism and global (in)securities. She is the author of, most recently, “Requiem for Risk: Non-knowledge and Domination in the Governance of Weapons circulation,”

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International Political Sociology, 2020, and “Debunking the Myth of the ‘Robust Control Regime’: Arms Export Controls during War and Armed Conflict,” Global Policy, 2023
Joanna Spear’s *The Business of Armaments* examines the history of Armstrongs and Vickers, two prominent British armaments firms that merged in 1927 and whose legacy components persist to this day, tucked within Rolls Royce and BAE Systems. Covering the century between 1855 and 1955, Spear’s book integrates business and diplomatic history to propose a new understanding of the firms’ relationship to the British state. Spear depicts Armstrongs and Vickers (later Vickers-Armstrongs Limited) as independent actors who developed their own domestic strategies and foreign policies. She marshals evidence from company papers to show that while the firms pursued close proximity to the British government, they did not drive government decisionmaking. Two devastating world wars, the expansion of the modern state, and the decline of the British Empire, however, did influence and change the relationship. In the decades after the book ends, the British government repeatedly intervened and eventually nationalized much of Vickers-Armstrongs.

*The Business of Armaments* fits within multiple secondary literatures. By embracing the significance of material culture in domestic and foreign policy, Spear incorporates company records into diplomatic history and international relations.1 Amidst the voluminous literature on armaments production during the First and Second World Wars—in addition to histories of disarmament and rearmament in the interwar period—Spear contends that Armstrongs and Vickers operated as independent actors, forging their own paths pursuant to economic incentives rather than at the behest of a government or international organizations (or peace movements for that matter).2

Spear organizes the book in two parts covering domestic sales (contracts with the Britain government) and foreign sales (selling to foreign governments and groups). These activities occurred simultaneously. Armstrongs and Vickers negotiated with the British government while also seeking foreign contracts in Latin America, Asia, and Turkey. Their business models changed as the companies grew from family firms to limited liability companies with institutional shareholders. Taking advantage of licensing agreements and strategic mergers, they used price fixing to drive up profits and bribes to win contracts abroad, according to Spear. The firms successfully expanded product lines into new military technologies (e.g., submarines and tanks) and made unsuccessful attempts to diversify with consumer brands during the interwar years between the First and Second World Wars. Vickers invested in innovation to develop “technologically sophisticated armament products,”—especially during market lulls (13-14, 337, 342). This helped sustain it up to a point.

Spear’s book is a compelling account of the period from the Crimean War to the nuclear age. It left me with three questions—some of which may be requests for points of clarification. The first is whether the firms’ priorities fundamentally changed over the course of that hundred years. In the end, did profits trump patriotism or other ideological motivations?

The second question—in this case a set of questions—has to do with Armstrongs and Vickers’ use of financial intelligence. Spear writes that Armstrong and Vickers’ directors aspired toward solid relationships

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with British government officials. While Armstrongs succeeded in this endeavor, Vickers struggled to cultivate the same elite ties. Vickers turned to intelligence sharing to demonstrate its usefulness to the British state (336-337). The information shared varied widely. Spear documents a fascinating First World War case involving a Vickers’ director and a Greek arms dealer who was attempting to bribe Greek politicians and then briefing Prime Minister H.H. Asquith and Chancellor of the Exchequer Reginald McKenna on the mission (117). Other examples are less dramatic and include providing rumors of alliances and foreign leaders’ intentions (116).

In both cases, Armstrongs and Vickers appear to have developed unofficial channels for information-sharing. How exactly did they develop these contacts in government? Did they also receive intelligence that influenced their business decisions? Were the firms closer to specific government departments or individuals than others? Did they have contacts in British intelligence as well? Did these relationships continue after the Second World War?

During the period covered by Spear, US armaments dealers also professed to have close contact with US intelligence. It would not be terribly surprising that private companies shared “intelligence” with government officials in order to influence outcomes and shape policy toward a conducive business environment. However, the reader is left wondering whether the armaments firms—with their close ties to foreign governments and knowledge of military preparedness—provided unique insights desired by British diplomats and intelligence services.

All this gets at the nature of the relationship between the state and the firms. Spear argues that Vickers-Armstrong “always maintained some interests distinct from those of the British Government…” (8). This position differs from those of two books mentioned by Spear: Katherine Epstein’s *Torpedo* and David Edgerton’s *Warfare State.* Spear challenges Edgerton’s assertion that “British armament firms (broadly defined) were fully at the disposal of the British state and that there was therefore a military-industrial complex” (8). Additionally, Spear contends that contemporaries viewed the armaments firms as separate from the state. Contemporary critics, she writes, saw the armaments firms as “independent ‘merchants of death’ fomenting wars to reap profits, acting in their own interests, colluding with international firms and disregarding the interests of their home states” (5, italicized in the original).

My third question is whether this was indeed how foreign governments and armaments firms viewed the relationship between Armstrongs and Vickers and the British government. US records suggest that US government officials and firms considered the British government to be closer and working more in line with private manufacturers. Both US government officials and business executives looked upon this perceived arrangement with annoyance and envy.

That perception had real-world implications. In late 1919, Ronald Lindsay, the counselor of the British Embassy in Washington, requested that Secretary of State Robert Lansing and the United States adhere to a

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Protocol of the 1919 Arms Traffic Convention signed at the Paris Peace Conference. The British government had denied the export of arms and munitions from a private British firm to Brazil, which had not signed the treaty, and desired the United States to do the same. Lansing responded that the US government did not regulate arms and munitions by private firms except for in the case of “Mexico, China, and Bolshevik Russia.” Only during times of war would the United States control arms exports generally, according to Acting Secretary of State Frank Polk. 

Five years later, representatives of Winchester Arms Company, DuPont, and the Colt Company aired their grievances against American administrations for failing to support their economic interests and in contrast to foreign governments. During a government-convened meeting with private munitions and arms manufacturers in advance of the 1925 League of Nations Conference for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammunition and in Implements of War, State Department officials reiterated that the US government “disagreed with providing diplomatic assistance to help private American companies sell military material overseas.” The vice president of Colt’s Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company argued that his company’s competitors received “active and earnest assistance from their respective governments,” while the US government failed to support American private manufacturers to secure contracts abroad.

None of this is to presume that arrangements were static. The British and American governments shifted their approaches after the Second World War. As Spear notes, in the 1950s the “British Government actively supported arms exports to markets such as Latin American and the Middle East” (4). This shift leads me again to think of the first question: the extent to which commercial and ideological considerations shaped fundamental assumptions and key objectives in the dual contexts of a faltering British Empire and the burgeoning Cold War.

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7 The Acting Secretary of State to the British Chargé (Lindsay), 13 March 1920, in FRUS, 1920, vol. I, 205.
8 Allen Dulles, Division of Near Eastern Affairs, Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 15 April 1925, 500.A14/314–500.A14/356, Box 5195, CDF 1910–29, RG 59, NARA.
9 Vice President, Colt’s Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Co.to A.W. Dulles, Near Eastern Division, Department of State, 1925, 500.A14/357–500.A14/402, Box 5196, CDF 1910–29, RG 59, NARA.
There is now a burgeoning literature on the history of the arms trade. Although many of the themes covered in this literature overlap, there are also distinct sub-genres. One approach has been to focus on the role that specific companies, or groups of companies have played in the domestic and/or international arms trade in a particular era. On the one hand, this sub-genre delves into the sui generis contingencies, business culture, and turns of fortune that constitute the distinctive history of a particular company. On the other hand, such histories can also serve as a synecdoche for the arms trade culture of a particular country, region, and era. Joanna Spear’s new book represents an impressive contribution, both to this sub-genre, and to the historical literature on the arms trade more generally. Drawing on extensive original archival research and equally extensive engagement with relevant secondary literature (the synthesis of which is a notable feat on its own), the book provides a detailed and original examination of two major British defense companies—Armstrongs and Vickers—from the nineteenth century through to the 1950s. This includes a granular analysis of the inception and evolution of each firm, their interactions with the British state, and their efforts to market weapons in Latin America, Asia, and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey. The book partly works as a fascinating business history of two key players in the British arms industry, and Spear is at pains to highlight the difference in the approaches adopted by each company. At the same time, the book holds broader lessons for our understanding of the role of laissez-faire in British defense industrial policy, the sales and lobbying strategies pursued by defense companies, their ability to influence weapons procurement specifically, and the defense and foreign policy positions of British governments more generally. Along the way, the book also contributes to discussions on the role of arms firms in the run-up to World War One, and debates on the appropriateness, or otherwise, of UK defense policy in the inter-war years.

The book is lighter on conceptual/theoretical discussions but does aim to investigate two key questions. The first is whether the relationship between the firms and the British government provides support for the idea that a British military-industrial complex (MIC) was in operation during the period under consideration (Spear’s answer is no). The second is whether British arms firms had power in their relationship with the state (the answer, it turns out is, not so much) and, if so, what kind. As already noted, this is an impressive and rigorous piece of research that will—and should—become an important reference point for future researchers. I am, for the most part, pretty much in awe of Spear’s achievement here. However, for the

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remainder of this review I do want to enter two slight quibbles. The first regards the treatment of government arms export policy, and the second concerns Spear’s treatment of the MIC question.

On the question of arms export policy, Spear notes that “armament firms sometimes undertook exports that the British government was powerless to prevent” and suggests that the 1870 Foreign Enlistment Act “was the first legislation enabling the British government to restrict private arms exports, and then only to states at war.” Indeed, she suggests that governments were “initially indifferent to the impact of armament firms’ exports—unless they affected British neutrality or reserves for war” (3). Only subsequently, and only incrementally, were more expansive export controls instituted, particularly after World War One. More generally, a key claim is that for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the British state operated a policy of laissez-faire in relation to the issue of arms exports.

In many respects, this picture of British policy is not wrong. This is perhaps best illustrated by an example not covered in the book since the subject matter means that it inevitably focuses mostly on the trade in major weapons rather than small arms (a lacunae that might, nevertheless, have been better addressed, if only to provide more context for the discussion on arms export policy). However, the case of the trade in British-supplied firearms to the Asante (Ashanti) in the early 1870s represents a remarkable example of how laissez-faire was refracted through both legal opinion and policy frameworks. British efforts to prevent arms reaching the Asante in the Gold Coast were constrained by the fact that firearms were routed via French-controlled Asinee where “large quantities of arms and ammunition [were landed] from English vessels.”

Consequently, the Colonial Office produced a draft bill imposing targeted restrictions on arms exports from Britain to the Gold Coast. However, government law officers were adamant the bill should not be submitted to Parliament, partly because of concerns about the broader implications for Britain’s obligations under the principles of neutrality, but also because (absent a blanket ban on all arms exports) it would “introduce a restriction upon the Commerce of this Country entirely new in international law and most difficult to carry out,” a view that is difficult to reconcile with earlier examples of British export restraint. The commissioner of customs was equally pessimistic about the ability of customs officers to enforce the bill given their limited powers under current legislation.

The upshot was that—despite repeated requests from the Colonial Office—the bill never even made it onto the floor of the House of Commons, and a third Anglo-Asante war soon broke out. This was accompanied by British efforts to stop the trade in arms at the Gold Coast itself, including a naval blockade that remained in force until February 1874. Nevertheless, arms supplied from Britain continued to flow to the Asanti, prompting one official to complain that “it is commercial freedom run mad for us to be fighting our own merchants as well as the Ashanti.” Viewed from the perspective of contemporary British policy, the inability of the state to introduce prohibitions on exports that were so clearly inimical to its interests represents a remarkable illustration of the extent to which free trade ideology shaped attitudes to the idea of prohibitions on arms exports. It also demonstrates the profound limits of realist IR explanations of arms export policy in

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3 Mr Holland to the Chairman of the Commissioners of Customs, Downing St, 22 May 1872, in F083/806, General Importation of Arms to West Coast of Africa. Export of Arms from the United Kingdom 1873-1879.
4 Holland to the Chairman.
6 Commissioners of Customs to Colonial Office, Custom House, 27 May 1873, No. 88 in F083/806.
7 Freda Wolfson, British Relations with the Gold Coast, 1843-1890, Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1950, p. 294-295
8 Cited in Wolfson, British Relations with the Gold Coast, 297.
9 Examples of realist or structural realist literature includes: Frank Blackaby, Prvoslav Davinic, Eva Greenbäck, Mary Kaldor and Signe Landgren, The Arms Trade with the Third World (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wikssell, 1971), 17-41;
general, as opposed to constructivist and critical theory explanations\textsuperscript{10} that are more concerned with how foreign policy subjectivities are shaped in, and by, the realm of the ideational. As already noted, therefore, Spear’s claims about the inability of British governments to restrict arms exports from the late nineteenth century to the early 1900s are largely correct.

However, there are also important qualifications to this picture that might have been given more emphasis, notwithstanding the brief nod to the issue of neutrality and reserves for war. As I have highlighted elsewhere,\textsuperscript{11} while restraints on peacetime exports from imperial metropoles were largely precluded in the late nineteenth century, the period was also characterized by an obsessive concern on the part of imperial powers with the effort to control the flow of firearms into and within colonial spaces—not least because imperial order (such as it was) rested on the perpetuation of a qualitative advantage in firepower. This was certainly qualified by a variety of countervailing incentives to supply arms into these very same spaces, so the effort to control arms flows was always incomplete and subject to evasion. Nevertheless, as the nineteenth century progressed, the spaces of empire were increasingly subject to intensive efforts to restrict the trade in firearms via regional agreements between colonial powers, naval blockades, import controls, internal regulation of firearms ownership, and export controls that were instituted at key nodal points in regional arms markets. Consequently, the philosophy of laissez-faire that operated with regards to peacetime arms exports from Britain was substantially modified when it came to controlling arms flows into, between, and within, colonial spaces.

A further problem lies in the claim that the 1871 Foreign Enlistment Act was the first legislation enabling the government to restrict the arms exports of private firms. On the contrary, it was longstanding practice for the state to prohibit arms exports during times of war. During the Seven Years War (1756–63) for example, the British government passed an act (renewed every 6 months during the war) that imposed prohibitions on the export of saltpetre, gunpowder, arms, and ammunition. This was supplemented with an extensive system of general and individual export licenses which permitted exceptions to these prohibitions.\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, in the run-up to the Crimean War, the government issued a proclamation restricting the export of ammunition, military, and naval stores, as well as a range of dual-use items (e.g., marine engines and boilers, as well as their components).\textsuperscript{13} The Times subsequently reported “several seizures… of engines built or partly built for the Russian government.”\textsuperscript{14} This regime was supplemented with a form of licensing system for arms exports to

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\textsuperscript{13} The Times, “London,” Monday February 20, 1854,” Feb 20, 1854, 8.

\textsuperscript{14} The Times, April 25, 1854, 6.
regions outside Europe and the Mediterranean, including a requirement for exporters to deposit a bond guaranteeing delivery at the declared port of destination.\footnote{Atwater, “British Control over the Export of War Materials,” 296.}

Moreover, during periods of rolling warfare, exceptional wartime prohibitions effectively became a permanent part of the policy landscape. For example, the war with Revolutionary France was followed by the Napoleonic wars, war between the US and Britain from 1812–1815, and the need to respond to revolts in Spain’s colonies in America. Thus, apart from brief periods of peace (e.g., following the 1802 Treaty of Amiens between Britain and France) the decades from the 1790s through to the 1820s were characterized either by specific prohibitions of one kind or another on British arms exports, and/or broader systems of blockade and economic warfare that not only represented the very antithesis of \textit{laissez-faire} but inevitably encompassed the trade in arms.

A further spur for restraint arose from obligations in Treaties of Friendship that sometimes required one or both parties to refrain from arms exports to the enemy of the partner state. For example, the 1814 Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between Britain and Spain included a commitment from Britain to prevent its subjects from furnishing arms and ammunition to Spain’s insurgent colonies in America. Consequently, Britain prohibited exports to the Spanish-American colonies and the West Indies (lest exports there should find their way to the Spain’s colonies).\footnote{Elton Atwater, “British Control Over the Export of War Materials,” \textit{The American Journal of International Law}, 33:2, 1939): page range, here 294; \textit{The Times}, “South America,” August 21, 1817, 3.} Ironically, from July 1819, concerns about adherence to the principles of neutrality also led to the imposition of similar restrictions on supplies to Spain itself, restrictions only lifted in 1823.\footnote{\textit{The Times}, July 14, 1819, 3; \textit{The Times}, June 17, 1823, 3; Atwater, “British Control over the Export of War Materials,” 295.} Likewise, the 1814 Treaty of Kiel between Britain and Denmark, reaffirmed earlier treaties requiring both parties to refrain from furnishing the provisions of war to their enemies. Thus, when war broke out between Denmark and Prussia in 1848, British customs officers were ordered to prevent the export of arms or warlike stores to be used in hostilities against the Danish government.\footnote{Liverpool Mail, “Customs House Intelligence,” 10 June 1848, 5; \textit{Kentish Mercury}, “Exportation of Arms-Danish War,” 10 June 1848, p. 3; Atwater, “British Control over the Export of War Materials,” 296, n. 16.} Beyond these measures, as Spear highlights, the government sometimes used measures other than formal export regulation to limit arms exports. For instance, she cites the example of Vickers signing a deal with the government in the early 1900s agreeing not to sell submarines to Europe (84).

Furthermore, the 1870 Foreign Enlistment Act was by no means the first legislation that enabled the British government to impose peacetime restraints on arms exports. The act itself was essentially a successor to the original Foreign Enlistment Act of 1819, which already prohibited the fitting out, equipping, or arming of any ship or vessel for a foreign state engaged in a war in which Britain itself was a neutral. It is certainly the case that these provisions of the 1819 act largely languished unused until the outbreak of the US Civil War (one exception being its operation during the 1843 Texan war of independence against Mexico).\footnote{Ephraim Douglas Adams, \textit{Great Britain and the American Civil War}, Vol 1 and II, (New York: Longman Green and Company, 1925), 83, n. 966.} However, American claims that Britain had failed in its neutral duty to prevent British merchants supplying vessels to the Confederates during the Civil War ultimately led to arbitration in Geneva and the award of $15.5 million to the United States\footnote{Elisabeth Chadwick, “The British View of Neutrality in 1872,” in Pascal Lottaz and Herbert R Reginbogin, eds., \textit{Notions of Neutralities} (Lanham. Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, 2019), 91.} (over $388 million at 2023 prices). To this day, this remains a vanishingly rare example of voluntary reparations from one state to another for the excesses of its arms export policy. Moreover, it was this that spurred the British, in 1870, to revise and enhance the Foreign Enlistment Act. This included
widening its scope so the intention to build, arm, and equip for the military use of a belligerent was declared an offence, and enhancing executive powers so that arrests could be made on suspicion of an offense. Subsequently, the state issued various arrest warrants and detained ships under suspicion during wars where Britain had proclaimed neutrality, including the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1871, the Russo-Turkish war of 1877—1878, and the Sino-Japanese war of 1904–1905.21 As this discussion illustrates, while the essence of Spear’s depiction of British policy is largely accurate, there was also a more complex and thicker web of export restraints that were in operation, even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

A second issue that deserves more interrogation concerns Spear’s discussion of whether a British military-industrial complex existed. Her position is clear: “the argument for a British military-industrial complex fails for the firms and periods covered in this book” (351). She further notes that up until the Great War, “laissez faire meant that a military-industrial complex could not take root” (350), while government–firm relationships were distant and conflictual, characterized by duels over contract awards, prices, royalties, and patents. Moreover, armament firms also pursued their own independent policies, including the operation of cartels and price fixing schemes, plus exports that were sometimes inimical to the interests of the state. At the most, by the 1950s, when the study ends, state–firm relationships were “interdependent and close,” as illustrated by the states “dominance of industrial planning and regulation, provision of subsidies for research and development, and support for exports.” Nevertheless, Spear suggests, “armament firms and the state still retained distinct and incompatible interests” (10) (e.g., over profit levels, exports, levels of subsidy etc.).

One drawback in this discussion is that Spear does not provide a formal definition of the MIC, or a typology of key characteristics associated with its presence.22 Given (as she notes) the vagueness of the concept, and the fact it often functions more as a “floating signifier,” and is thus subject to multiple meaning and interpretations, this is doubly important. More substantively, such a typology would have permitted a more fine-grained analysis in which the presence or absence of different factors could have been presented for each decade of the period under consideration. For example, it seems clear that quite early on there was a revolving door between industry and government officials (e.g., Armstrengs supplied a succession of directors of naval construction); that industry representatives sat on government committees; and that members of the Commons and Lords, were courted by industry, and used to lobby government (indeed, Stuart Rendell of Armstrengs became an MP in 1880). Likewise, Spear’s characterization of the 1950s as one in which the state provided subsidies for research and development, and support for exports would seem to confirm the presence of yet more characteristics that are typical of an MIC. In short, even based on the material presented in the book, there seems a case for a more nuanced conclusion—one that views the book as the story of a gradually emerging British MIC, rather than a blanket rejection of the argument for an MIC.

Moreover, much of the claim that the MIC thesis fails rests on the suggestion that private industry had little influence over government policy, and that the relationship was characterized by distance and conflict. The question of whether an MIC existed is, however, distinct from the question of whether any nascent or actual MIC was able to exert greater influence relative to other actors who were attempting to shape public policy preferences. The presence of the former is not dependent on the latter. Also, conflicts over issues such as prices, profits, and contracts are better understood as part of the inherent conflict that exists in state-defense


22 Many definitions abound but, for example, Brunton identified 5 features of the MIC: reliance on private contractors for peacetime military procurement; the revolving door; defense pressure groups; the preparedness ethos, and state support of strategic industry. See, Bruce Bunton, “An Historical Perspective on the Future of the Military-Industrial Complex,” The Social Science Journal, 28:1 (1991): 45-62 page numbers, here 47.
industry relationships, rather than the absence of an MIC per se—just as competition between defense companies for contracts does not preclude a confluence of interests on other issues. Thus, to the extent that an MIC is present, such conflicts are best understood as indicative of different agendas within an MIC. Likewise, Spear notes that the government sometimes prioritized work for the Royal Dockyards and the Royal Armouries, who were also not above borrowing elements of designs submitted by private firms. Once again, however, this is best understood as an example of conflict over the allocation of resources within a nascent British MIC. Conversely, Spear cites Treasury and Foreign Office hostility or indifference as illustrative of the state’s distance from industry, but these are entities that are arguably distinct from an MIC.

Furthermore, the MIC concept emerged at a particular point in history, as a derogation from a specifically modern status quo norm of the rational Weberian state, rather than the abolition of this norm—a status quo in which the state acts as the neutral arbiter of public policy preferences, rather than the preserve of personalized rule, patronage, and sectional interests. In other words, the very inception of the MIC concept is dependent on the idea, and to some degree, the empirical reality, of a state where friction with sectional interests is baked in. Consequently, the test for the influence of an MIC is not whether there was an absence of conflict over contracts, pricing etc., or even collusion among companies on prices, but whether such conflicts are also overlaid with relations, interactions, and policy outcomes that are notable enough to suggest the state, or state officials, have privileged defense-industrial interests relative to those of other public policy priorities.

Related to this question, Spear notes that the Admiralty had the right to inspect the financial records of all firms that supplied the Navy but failed to do so between 1929 and 1940 (162); The Economist observed in 1914 that the commercial agents of armament firms were received at embassies abroad, but not those of other branches of trade (29); and in the inter-war years select aircraft firms known as “the family” were provided with design work to keep them in business (13). Such examples are at least suggestive of the fact that the relationship between government and industry was both conflictual and close—and arguably close enough to suggest that a British MIC might well have been emerging—and had perhaps even emerged by the end of the period under consideration.

The extent to which this nascent MIC was able to influence policy—and in what decades—is perhaps more debatable, but in this context, it is worth noting that military and defense expenditure accounted for 27 percent of government expenditure in 1890, 48 percent in 1900, and 25 percent in 1955. Even in the lean period of the inter-war years, it still accounted for substantial portions of government expenditure (e.g., 11.4 percent in 1928 and 10.5 percent in 1933). By 1938, it was back up to almost 30 percent of government expenditure.23 In absolute terms in the 1930s, “Britain spent as much as any other country on warfare,”24 its navy and air force were among the strongest in the world, and it was a leading global arms exporter. By 1938 defense accounted for 5.9 percent of gross national income compared with 1.2 percent for Health and 1.9 percent for education.25 This might suggest that despite their many differences, the different elements of a nascent British MIC were often relatively successful in promulgating what Mills would later call, “the military definition of reality,”26 notwithstanding Treasury skepticism, Foreign Office indifference, and the countervailing influence of powerful movements for peace in much of this period.

25 Edgerton, 68.
Today, the importance of supporting large, high-tech defense firms is largely taken for granted. Spurred by NATO’s support for Ukraine against the recent unprovoked Russian invasion, and concerns over similar action from China against Taiwan, defense firms such as Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems—which brought in $64.4 billion and $25.7 billion in revenues in 2022, respectively—stand poised to benefit from a windfall of new contracts.1 Whereas prior historical debates over national security centered on the need to maintain a standing army in peacetime or rein in “merchants of death” that sought war for their own gains, the voting public’s current general acceptance of the need to support a vast defense industry remains one of the most consequential political developments of the last century.2 Understanding the nature of the relationship between the modern defense industry and the state remains fertile ground for both political scientists and historians.

Such discussions often remain couched within the ubiquitous “military-industrial complex” (MIC), a term President Dwight Eisenhower used in his 1961 Farewell Address to refer to a particular closeness among defense contractors and government that he feared possessed the potential to “endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”3 Much ink has been split over the MIC’s origins, continued existence, and even its very definition, which has ranged from a more focused, historically specific relationship within the United States during the decades of the Cold War to a more all-encompassing vision that includes “any confluence of profit and policy that undermines the public’s overall welfare.”4 While the preponderance of the scholarship over the MIC has focused on the United States, historians like David Edgerton and Katherine Epstein have posited the existence of a similar British military-industrial complex before the Cold War.5

It is within this larger discussion over the origins of a British military-industrial complex that Joanna Spear places her book, The Business of Armaments: Armstrongs, Vickers and the International Arms Trade, 1855–1955. Spear merges extensive research in the archival holdings of Armstrongs, Vickers, and the British government with a wide breadth of secondary sources to illustrate how two of the most important armaments firms in British history struggled to survive during a century that was defined by rapid technological change and political upheaval. In detailing the various strategies the two firms adopted, she effectively reveals how their relationship with the British state—both individually and, after 1927, as Vickers-Armstrongs—“evolved from

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3 Farewell address by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 17, 1961; Final TV Talk 1/17/61 (1), Box 38, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61, Eisenhower Library; National Archives and Records Administration.
independence to interdependence” (4). In so doing, however, Spear makes larger claims that the scope of her study struggles to support.

Spear begins by questioning previous scholarship that postulated the existence of a pre-Cold War MIC in Great Britain. She argues that Epstein’s discussion of the continued tension between the Whitehead Company and the Admiralty over the production of torpedoes undercuts Epstein’s claims of the existence of an early twentieth-century MIC in Great Britain. She likewise dismisses Edgerton’s presumption that in the interwar period “British armament firms (broadly defined) were fully at the disposal of the British state and that there was therefore a military-industrial complex” (8). Positing that “there would need to be a record of a significant, consistent confluence of interests between the British state and the firms” for an MIC to exist in this earlier period, Spear presents a theoretical framework based on three distinct powers—relational, agenda-setting, and ideological—to determine the degree to which Armstrongs and Vickers operated in agreement with or independent from the British government (10).

To prove that “this was not a seamless military-industrial complex,” Spear presents the history of Armstrongs and Vickers in two parts, one that takes a chronological approach to their activities in the home market, and another that employs a thematic focus on efforts to sell armaments abroad in Latin America, Asia, and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey (10). Throughout the book, she skillfully demonstrates how the two firms confronted various challenges in their relationship with the British government. Both faced the existence of Royal Arsenals with an initial monopoly over gun production, a government that was willing to utilize private invention but loathe to pay royalties, and deep-seated class prejudice against those who were engaged in trade activities. In response, Armstrongs cultivated relationships with those in the Admiralty as well as close patronage ties with the aristocracy, while Vickers focused more on cultivating a reputation for expertise and investing in innovation during economic contractions. Spear details how the uncertainty of government contracts compelled the two firms to diversify their interests (a survival strategy that reached its peak in the years immediately after World War One), cooperate to protect their domestic market from foreign rivals, and collude to set prices to ensure an adequate profit on domestic contracts as exemplified in a 1906–1913 price setting and profit sharing agreement.

Spear details a variety of episodes and escapades within part I that illustrate the lengths to which these two firms went to remain viable as they lurched from the feasts of the Boer War and the two world wars to the corresponding famines of postwar contractions and the Great Depression. She rightly focuses on the persistent disputes over royalties among the two firms and the government, with the latter rejecting any notion that development costs entitled firms to a monopoly on production contracts. The reduction in available munitions known as the “shell crisis” of 1915 prompted a wartime expansion of government orders and regulatory authority that proved both a boon and a source of aggravation for munitions manufacturers. After World War I, the two firms confronted a series of crises—most notably a radical reduction in British government defense spending and concerted international efforts at arms control, such as the Washington Conference of 1922—that proved stubbornly resistant to their lobbying efforts.

As both firms faced insolvency, a government-approved merger brought the two competitors/collaborators together as Vickers-Armstrongs in 1927. The new firm continued in its efforts to collude with other arms manufacturers on pricing in order to prevent a race to the bottom while it struggled to secure sales on the international market in the face of British export controls. Rising international tension in the 1930s helped

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Vickers-Armstrongs weather the public exposure of its foreign bribery practices, which were brought to light through the investigations of the Nye Committee in the United States and the Bankes Committee in Great Britain. Spear concludes part I with a brief discussion of Vickers-Armstrongs' activities during World War Two and its unsuccessful efforts to forestall the nationalization of the steel industry under the postwar Labour Government of Clement Attlee prior to its brief return to the private sector under the subsequent Conservative Government.

Spear’s detailed discussion of the efforts of Armstrongs and Vickers to sell arms in three distinct export markets in part II vividly shows the tension between the firms’ economic interests and the British government’s foreign policy. She illustrates how the two firms found themselves continually hamstrung in their efforts to compete against American, Italian, and German companies by a Foreign Office that was more focused on diplomatic considerations than the survival of the nation’s major arms suppliers. Anti-British sentiment required Armstrongs and Vickers to present themselves as entities that were distinct from the British government, a perception they cultivated with mixed success. As in the domestic case, government policy prompted the adoption of certain strategies, such as crafting alliances with foreign firms and the creation of foreign subsidiaries. Exactly what types of vessels and armaments should be approved for export remained a continual sources of tension between the two companies and the Admiralty. Even when Armstrongs and Vickers had provided the necessary bribes to foreign officials, secured financing, and obtained Foreign Office approval, the British Government could, and did, seize recently built, modern dreadnaughts to meet national emergencies. As with part I, Spear shows that a large gap existed between the British Government’s diplomatic agenda and the desires of Armstrongs/Vickers that undermined their ability to export on their own terms.

Spear argues that Armstrongs and Vickers constituted independent actors throughout the period of her book’s study, a status that presented numerous hurdles but also provided a certain freedom from strict regulation and oversight. Returning to her three-part “faces of power” framework, she concludes that both firms possessed only “limited” relational power in their interactions with a British government that “consistently worked solely in its own interests” and finds “no evidence” that either firm exerted any agenda-setting or ideological power before or after their merger (346-351). As a result, she asserts that “the argument for a British military-industrial complex fails for the firms and periods covered in this book” (351).

Spear has crafted a meticulous history of two of the most important British defense firms that will surely be of interest to scholars of business history, policy history, the history of technology, and, to an extent, international relations. The study, however, is not without its faults. Other than a brief mention of the post-Second World War Labour government’s nationalization policies, the “British government” comes across as a monolithic entity throughout the century that is discussed in this book. In addition, the impact of postwar debt accumulation on the debate over arms exports is largely unexplored, and discussions relating to military aviation—a central “command technology” during much of this period—remain underdeveloped. Further

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7 This can vividly be seen in attempts to export aircraft, an important dual-use technology of the interwar period. The Foreign Office both aided and hindered Vickers and Handley Page in their efforts to export aircraft to China while, at the same time, the British government sold their surplus aircraft to a syndicate connected with Sir Frederick Handley Page and then offered limited assistance as he sought to sell them in the promising US market. See Noel H. Pugach, “American Aircraft Competition and the China Arms Embargo, 1919–1921,” Diplomatic History 2, no. 4 (Fall 1978): 351-371, and Sean Seyer “An Industry Worth Protecting?: The Manufacturers Aircraft Association’s Struggle Against the British Surplus, 1919-1922,” Journal of Policy History 34, no. 3 (2022): 403-439.

analysis within several chapters would also assist the reader in connecting the vast amount of historical material to the theoretical concepts that are presented in the introduction.

The focus on whether a military-industrial complex existed in Great Britain prior to the Cold War is the study’s greatest handicap, especially given its limited focus on two manufacturers. Without a clear working definition of the term “military-industrial complex” in the introduction to serve as an evaluative standard, the reader is left with an all-or-nothing vision that fails to account for the importance of multiple touchpoints over time that incrementally led to increased interconnectivity and reliance between defense contractors and their monopsony client. Relationships between governments and defense contractors have never been perfectly harmonized, even in the United States at the height of the Cold War. Various departments within government, elected representatives with power over the budget, industry organizations such as the Society of British Aircraft Constructors and the Manufacturers Aircraft Association in the United States, and each individual contractor, all had their own agendas. While one can debate Epstein’s assertion that “the military-industrial complex began in the late nineteenth century, not in the mid-twentieth century,” she nonetheless showed how the development of torpedoes necessitated the concurrent development of systems to determine ownership over the patents that were used in and derived from public/private R&D, the ownership and control over sensitive industrial information, and the politically charged questions of proper compensation and external sales. It was within this messy and contentious process of development and procurement of specific technologies that military authorities and private defense contractors hashed out their differences and, albeit begrudgingly, came to recognize their shared interests within a relationship that was defined by a clear and ever-present imbalance of power. Unfortunately, Spear’s central argument boils down to proving the non-existence of something rather than providing a better understanding of how and why the relationship between Armstrongs/Vickers and the British government changed over time and what lessons, if any, we can apply to the present.

Nevertheless, Spear decisively shows how the disparity between the desires of the British government and the goals of Armstrongs/Vickers remained a source of continuous contention while deftly illuminating the tactics the firms pursued as they sought to survive without courting the wrath of their primary purchaser. One can only hope that those who accept Spear’s call to study “the nature of the relationships between individual armament firms and the state” can move past the constraints of a conceptual framework that—like the technological determinism versus social construction debate within the history of technology—may have outlived its usefulness (350).  

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9 We see this even during a “hot” war like World War II, when armaments manufacturers and the federal government continued to disagree on a variety of matters even while working towards a common goal. See Mark R. Wilson, Destructive Creation: American Business and the Winning of World War II (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania), 2016.

10 Epstein, Torpedo, 229. For a history of the information security regime in the early 20th century and its further development after WWII see Mario Daniels and John Krige, Knowledge Regulation and National Security in Postwar America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).

11 For an introduction to this debate see Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, eds., Does Technology Drive History?: The Dilemma of Technological Determinism (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994) and Wiebe E. Bijker, Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change (Cambridge, MA: 1995).
Joanna Spear has produced a timely history of the relationship between arms companies and the state. Assessing the independence and power of Armstron-gs and Vickers—two of the most prominent armaments companies at the time—in relation to the British state and foreign governments in the century from 1855, she argues that claims of a military-industrial complex during this period are overblown. Instead, she argues, the relational, agenda-setting, and ideological power of the companies in relation to the state was limited, and they followed independent and autonomous strategies until at least the late interwar period.

Spear argues that in the nineteenth century, the existence of state arsenals meant that companies were independent and unsupported—but this also meant they had freedom from the constraints of British government strategic interests (2-3). With the onset of World War One, the state regulated military production and the firms built solely for them. While government domination of production ended in 1918, its regulatory role remained. A collapse in orders from the British state led to the two companies merging in 1927 to become Vickers-Armstrongs (126); their interests were further threatened by the rise of international arms control, prompted by concerns about weapons reaching colonial territories (134). Public opinion grew increasingly hostile during the interwar period, crystallizing around the cry that arms companies were “merchants of death” (162-174). As Spear notes, rearmament by the British state during World War Two focused the company’s attention back on domestic production and led to increasing collaboration between state and industry. Overall, the two world wars made the state more regulatory and interventionist; this state intervention did not recede post-war (ch. 5). In the 1950s, the state adopted industrial strategies for key sectors, including armaments. The government prioritized national strategic interests over industrial concerns but “Luckily, the export interests of Vickers-Armstrongs now often coincided with the state’s interests in retaining a share of international markets and sustaining strategic influence in key areas of the globe” (4). By 1955 the state-firm relationship “had evolved from independence to interdependence” (4).

The book charts the similarities and differences in company interests, strategies, and relations with the British state and overseas governments across issues and over time. Across the century under consideration, the companies faced three main challenges: the British state’s laissez-faire ideology, which made it reluctant to support the companies via industrial strategy; class prejudice and southern English snobbery; and the hostility of key government departments such as the Treasury. In response, the strategies adopted by the companies included cultivating relationships with British state and foreign elites, including through the use of bribery; the creation of oligopolies, trusts, and rings to collude as a sector; and various forms of diversification such as exports, partnerships, and technological and sectoral diversification.

Spear assesses company influence along three axes: relational, agenda-setting, and ideological power. On the first, the government was indifferent to arms companies’ role in the wider economy due to the influence of laissez-faire thinking. It was only after 1886 that the government started to provide some help to companies, realizing the economic advantages of exports (3). While companies were not powerless, they were not granted subsidies and had frequent tussles with government over contracts and payments, and the government was more powerful. On the second axis, Spear argues that because they failed to win subsidies for armaments production, and could not keep arms control or outrage over their profits, or nationalization, off the agenda, there is no evidence for companies’ agenda-setting power. And Spear claims that there is no evidence that the companies exercised ideological power, as the companies and government had different interests, and at times of war the companies took the side of the government.

Spear’s study is fruitful for thinking about the history of relations between the state and arms capital and the operation of British power on the world stage. It comes at a time when British defense policy has become more publicly visible in response to the war in Ukraine, British arms exports are in the spotlight given their...
use by the Saudi-led coalition in the war in Yemen, and Anglo-American dominance of the international arms trade continues even as traditional competitors persist and newer ones emerge. In light of this context, two things struck me as I read the book. The first is the ongoing familiarity today of many of the practices and strategies devised by firms to promote their interests. The suite of strategies around political influence, bribery, and market concentration sounds familiar today, despite the changes to the global political economy and economic doctrine since the era of nineteenth century laissez-faire. A century ago the trick was to get a Member of Parliament (MP) “up to Barrow and stuff him full of wine and cigars for a week!” (162–3). Today, arms companies pay for dinners, foreign trips and the like for MPs to curry favor. One of the fruitful avenues for further research will be to chart the continuities and changes in the political economy of the sector and the ways that arms companies try to generate influence.

A key difference in today’s political economy is that arms company interests are inserted directly into state institutions, for example through UK Defence and Security Exports, which sits within the Department for Business and Trade. While arms companies are officially private, the state retains a so-called “golden share” in the largest British arms companies such as BAE Systems and Rolls Royce, allowing it to block changes in ownership or national control that it deems not to be in the national interest. And while in the century discussed by Spear, arms companies had to appear independent of government to sell to foreign governments (she gives the example of sales to the Ottoman Empire, 295), today BAE Systems presents itself wrapped in the Union Jack, even as it sells more to the US Department of Defense than to the UK Ministry of Defence. BAE Systems, today’s largest UK-headquartered arms company, is the direct descendant of Vickers-Armstrong: it was forced to merge with other companies in 1960 to make the British Aircraft Corporation, which in 1973 became British Aerospace, renamed BAE Systems in 1999 to market itself as a more international company.1

Another difference is that today, the state wants to sell weapons abroad as much as the companies do. As David Wearing has documented, arms export policy today is as much, if not more, about the strategic value of arms exports to British military power as it is about commercial profit.2 While the global political economy has shifted from laissez-faire to neoliberalism, the British state sets industrial strategy and plays a leading role in industrial production, through funding research and development costs, subsidies, and so on. The British state is firmly committed to maintaining the military industrial capacity it thinks it needs in order to remain a global military power. And while corporate profits are immense, a key development has been the growing investment in the arms industry by asset managers and investment firms: the global asset managers and investment firms BlackRock, Vanguard, and State Street now own 16.3 percent of the arms industry operating in the UK.3 While this share is comparable to other sectors of the economy, the arms industry generates higher returns than others and these returns are backstopped by the UK state via the Ministry of Defence and by foreign states.4 The arms industry is now a vehicle for corporate welfare for global capital. There is less a “wary dance” (1) and more a close embrace between arms capital and the state now.

Spear is right that military industrial complex and merchants of death arguments do not sit well together: one is about the overly close relation between the state and arms companies; the other is about the way companies play states off against each other. She notes that demands for nationalization in the 1930s saw the state as the solution (6). There are two issues at stake here: first, that nationalization is not necessarily the panacea that critics hope for. Paul Dunne and Ron Smith argue that “nationalised firms tend to be as expansionist and

4 Rogaly, The Asset Manager Arsenal.
acquisitive as private ones,” and there is nothing about nationalization that would necessarily prevent a military industrial complex because of the specific feature of monopsony. Indeed, the state now has its own geopolitical interest in maintaining military and strategic power through arms production and exports. Second, Spear gives a detailed account of the “constant disputes” (7) between the British state and arms capital: she argues there is less evidence of a confluence of interests between them than of “the two sides seeking to outsmart each other” (10); even with interdependence by 1950s, “collaboration did not equal harmony” (10). This takes me to my second question on reading the book, about the combined and relative contribution of the state and arms capital to the operation of “British” power broadly conceived. In particular, how should we characterize British power in the age of empire in the century under consideration?

The second thing that struck me reading the book is the absence of any explicit discussion of Britain as an empire: either conceptual discussion of how we should think about the operation of British power in the context of empire, or archival evidence of the companies’ involvement in, and the military dimensions of, the maintenance of the British empire. The book is divided into two halves, selling at home and abroad, yet there is no discussion of colonial supply lines and sales to and imports from imperial territories, so the empire is not apparent as a source or destination of either raw materials, components, or finished weapons, or a site of diversification or partnership. Of course, it is possible that it is simply the case that the company records and archives do not indicate any such imperial circuits. But there are a handful of references that piqued this empire-minded reader’s interest. The nationalization of the English Steel Corporation—in which Vickers-Armstrong had an interest—in 1950 raised “questions about the ESC’s relationship with Vickers (Eastern), covering India and Pakistan, and what new sales agreements would need to be put in place” (204). This small hint at the imperial presence of the company made me wonder what the history of Vickers (Eastern) is, and whether any factories in British India prior to Indian and Pakistani independence counted as “home” or “abroad,” how they were situated in relation to the rest of the company, and so on. And Canadian Vickers was established in 1911 to take advantage of the decision to build a Canadian navy—a move made independently of the British government (102-3). But this decision was itself a late and meagre development from Canada’s emergence of out of the British Empire, according to the Canadian Government itself. So empire is there in the background of the book and I am curious about what happens to how we think about the international arms trade and questions of (British) military power if we think about Britain as an imperial rather than purely national state, and what the presence or absence of armaments companies in those circuits might mean.

Spear situates the book in debates in political science about the military industrial complex and in history about British military strength. She is right that these disciplines “have traditionally assumed a dependent relationship between all types of firms and sovereign states, with the latter by far the dominant actors, making firms unnecessary for analysis” (5). This statement is annotated with a tantalizing footnote that is suggestive of what is at stake: Spear indicates the “notable exception” of the British East India Company from this general rule of the assumption of state dominance (5). The East India Company had imported, stored, and distributed weapons from Britain, and had set up ordnance factories in India from the mid-seventeenth century, controlling them until the Crown took direct up rule of India from 1858. This footnote and the reference to sovereign states hints at what is excluded by definitional fiat in the disciplines of history and political science—and much of IR as well—namely, any attention to empire, either historically or
methodologically, and the imbrication of formally private, commercial or corporate power with state power.⁸ A “classic pluralist stance which sees power as dispersed and not just lying with the state” allows us to “see where, beyond the government, power lies and how it is wielded” (11)—but Britain was empire and a capitalist democracy, not simply a democracy (11) denuded of any further characteristics.

What is so thought-provoking about the book is the careful archival and historical analysis of the tricky relationships between the two companies and the British state, in a period of laissez-faire, that demonstrates that the companies were not operating in tandem with the state. So how are we to conceptualize the relationship between state and capital, and how are we to think about arms exports or transfers overseas given the extent of the British empire—in short, what counts as “home” and what counts as “abroad”? And what are the implications for an assessment of “British” military strength? To complement and extend Spear’s engagement, I want to think about the entanglement of the arms trade, war and militarism with colonialism and empire, to consider questions of the state’s relationship with capital, where domestic and foreign policy begin and end, and where civilian and military production begin and end, from a different vantage point, in order to ask what a reframing of the study of the arms trade would look like if it centered imperialism and the colonial encounter. This is no mean feat in relation to the arms trade, armaments production, and military power, shot through as these literatures are with methodological nationalism and state-centrism.⁹

Britain was an imperial state for the century under consideration, rather than a nation-state “with” an empire.¹⁰ A colonial global political economy that understands states like Britain as imperial states “bring[s] within a common frame of analysis events and processes that are otherwise incorrectly disaggregated.”¹¹ So rather than repeating standard Eurocentric formulations that “the Industrial Revolution began in Europe and emanated outwards” (17), we should instead focus on “the central role that state-managed colonialism played in facilitating the development of global industrial capitalism.”¹² The Industrial Revolution, which is generally accepted as the endogenous stimulus to the modern arms trade, was simultaneously and necessarily also a colonial endeavor, and “the burgeoning arms trade emerged not only from the matrix of an industrial Prometheus unbound, but also from the wings of an imperial Juggernaut.”¹³

The century under examination of the book was one of laissez-faire economics, and the periodization makes sense insofar as the two firms moved into armaments production around mid-nineteenth century, the two world wars were major catalysts, and in the mid-twentieth century the British state started adopting a formal industrial strategy. But the periodization also obscures as much as it reveals: the state-corporate collaboration of the mercantilist period was crucial to the rise of the laissez-faire that put distance between companies and the state. As Atul Kohli puts it, “an activist state was essential to the early stages of the Industrial Revolution;

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a laissez-faire state was not the cause but a result of industrial success in Britain.” That activist state was also an imperial state.

So what happens if we foreground the imperial character of the British state and put political economy into conversation with empire to think about the dynamics and significance of armaments production? It means that the conceptualization of power changes from an assessment of the power of capital relative to the national state, to an assessment of the tensions and agreements between state and capital as an imperial complex of power. And it means that the distinctions between domestic and foreign policy, and between civilian and military production, get messy. Vickers was originally a milling business that moved into steel production, and into armaments in 1888; William Armstrong was an inventor and engineer (1-2). Examples from some of the other secondary literature indicate the involvement of the companies in the project of empire and the inextricability of civilian and military production. The biggest of all Armstrongs’ postwar ventures was the Newfoundland Project, which started in 1921 to build a paper mill—a project “built on foundations laid by others in large-scale resource development.” But since this project also contributed to the company’s ultimate financial collapse, empire is central to both the flourishing and the floundering of British industry. In 1922 Armstrongs became associated with railway schemes in New Zealand—a Dominion or self-governing settler-colony of Britain—designed to provide access to timber-growing areas. It also accepted shares in Union Steel Corporation of South Africa as payment for building a works there—half of all South African government orders for steel would go to that plant for ten years. South Africa was also a self-governing dominion at this point. And there were “protracted discussions” about a locomotive building plant in India: Armstrongs invested as much as £1m, although in the end no plant was built because the Indian Tariff Board refused protection.

Given these examples, the question of the relations between the companies and the national state starts to look rather narrow. Instead, we can look at how the shifting relations between them speak to the question of British power (understood as an imperial complex of state and non-state actors) on the global stage more broadly. Instead of thinking about state versus corporate interests and trying to ascertain which has the upper hand, we might more usefully think about the stage of capitalism described by Bhambra as “colonialism through private property” in which appropriation takes place “whether by individuals, companies or through the extension of the Crown’s dominion.”

The twin issues of political economy and empire are hopefully generative for extending the careful archival tracing of the two largest British arms companies in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century that Spear has conducted. I will certainly be carrying forward the importance of historical analysis and lessons about the tensions and disputes between the state and capital. If we think about British power as the amalgamated military and political power of state and capital, the tensions between them notwithstanding, there are analytical questions about who or what constitutes “Britain”—with its imperial history and enmeshment with global capital—and methodological questions about actors and sources, especially given the relative invisibility of empire in the company archives.

I am most grateful to Jennifer Erickson for initiating this roundtable on *The Business of Armaments* and for the time which our colleagues, Mary Barton, Neil Cooper, Sean Sayer, and Anna Stavrianakis have taken to review the book and provide thoughtful responses; their perspectives add much to the richness of the discussion on these issues. I am delighted to try to move some debates a bit further forward in responding to their thoughts on three key issues, the question of a British military industrial complex (MIC), the role of empire, and the intelligence activities of the firms.

As discussed in the book, while Armstrongs, Vickers and Vickers-Armstrongs began as completely independent actors, over time the armament firms developed relationships with various parts of the government, initially with the service departments (26-31). These relationships did not follow a standard pattern, but the way in which the relationships started out conditioned how they proceeded over a remarkable span of time. The Admiralty was the first to rely on the technological innovations and productive power of private firms and developed generally positive, though distant, relationships with firms that produced armor and warships such as Armstrongs and Vickers. By contrast, the War Office’s relationships with the firms were a bad mixture of frosty and conflictual owing to the consistent favoritism the War Office showed to the Royal Arsenals. This resulted in famines in gun orders between conflicts. These were followed by tsunamis of orders once conflicts were imminent, which the firms then struggled to fulfill to War Office timetables. In the burgeoning field of airpower, relationships were a mix. Naval airpower authorities were happy to work with private firms, but Army airpower was developed by the state through the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough. And, of course, for the firms the hardest government nuts to crack were the Treasury, who kept a very tight leash on service spending, and the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic Service, who wanted no role in aiding commerce (29). Attitudes in these latter departments really did not change until the 1930s.

A question that has animated the reviews concerns the relationships between these firms and the British government, and what it says about claims for a British military industrial complex. While Cooper considers that the two firms and the amalgamated Vickers-Armstrongs can be seen as a “synecdoche” for the whole industry, Sayer in contrast references the book’s “limited focus on two manufacturers” for considering the existence of a British military industrial complex. Armstrongs and Vickers were two large and extremely important British armament firms (despite the government’s successive attempts to bring in other manufacturers and create more competition). They produced innovative field guns, armor, heavy artillery, machine guns, warships, submarines, and early aircraft during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Each firm played a vital role in armaments production for the Great War. After the inter-war market exits and consolidations in the armaments sector, the amalgamated Vickers-Armstrongs’ importance only grew as it was the sole British armaments firm and an “oligopolist by government approval” (337), now also producing aircraft, and tanks.1 If these two firms are not the ideal basis for interrogating the idea of a British military industrial complex, what is?

When I went to the three main archives used in this book, the British National Archive (Kew), the Armstrongs Archive (Newcastle Upon Tyne), and the Vickers Archive (Cambridge), I expected to find a lot of evidence of collaboration—and possibly even collusion—between the firms and the state. I did not find it.

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1 Indeed, a key accusation made to the 1935–36 Royal Commission by Philip Noel Baker was that there was no longer any competition and that in many of the “most important and costly” forms of armaments and ammunition there was a virtual or absolute monopoly held by Vickers. He cited Vickers and their subsidiaries’ virtual monopoly over the production of: “Machine Guns, Artillery, Gun Mountings, Certain types of gun ammunition, Completely armoured warships, Armour plate (in conjunction with Beardmores and John Brown’s), Tanks.” Testimony of Philip Noel Baker to the Royal Commission, Day 10, Appendix p. 269 § 47.
It is possible that the archives of the two firms’ archives have been scrubbed. There is no obvious evidence of this, however. For example, date runs show no suspicious gaps and there were no obvious missing papers. Everything I found relevant to the question of a military industrial complex in the archives, in official reports, and in the copious secondary literature is discussed in the book, and particularly informs part I, which examines the efforts of these firms to sell armaments to the British state.

I concluded that Armstrongs and Vickers did not have either the agenda setting or the ideological power in their relationships with the state that would have been needed to change the course of British public policy in their favor. This is not to say that the firms did not try to influence procurement and military spending. They did, and those efforts were discussed, but crucially the firms were not successful. This accounts for my skepticism. The only actor with the ability to wield agenda setting and ideological power over the government was British public opinion, which the government necessarily responded to. For example, in an effort to mollify the public over the alleged role of armament firms in “fomenting” wars, and seeking to manage public opinion and to ensure rearmament was not imperiled, the government convened the 1935–1936 Royal Commission on the Private Manufacture of and Trading in Arms (Bankes Commission, 167-175).

Intriguingly, Cooper, Sayer, and Stavrianakis interpret the archive information that I present differently than I do. They see evidence of a British military industrial complex, whereas I set the bar for finding one considerably higher. I found minimal evidence that the activities of the firms had changed the course of military spending or procurement, which, for me, would have indicated a successful British military industrial complex. Without any evidence that a confluence of interests between the firms and the government was distorting the political process, then all that is found is a set of relationships, and this, to me, sets the bar too low (11). Cooper opines that “The question of whether a MIC existed is, however, distinct from the question of whether any nascent or actual MIC was able to exert greater influence relative to other actors who were attempting to shape public policy preferences.” I disagree. If having established relationships is the standard, then there would be a cotton industrial complex, a railway engine industrial complex, an agricultural industrial complex, etc.

Cooper and Sayer make the reasonable point that providing a formal definition of a MIC would have assisted the analysis. Following this train of thought, it may move the debate along to assess the British situation against a reading that Cooper references in this regard, Bruce Brunton’s “An Historical Perspective on the Future of the Military Industrial Complex.” To discuss this piece I provide here additional information to that which is contained in The Business of Armaments. While Brunton’s article specifically concerns the United States’ military industrial complex, which is a very different case due to the independent roles of the US Congress in setting military budgets and approving procurement decisions, Cooper suggests that it has useful categories for assessment. Brunton argues that “the military-industrial complex should be conceived of as a system of five institutions,” though his definition of institutions is a broad and unusual one. It is “either a habituated pattern of behavior or a way of thinking, or a going concern.” Below I discuss his five institutions against the British experience over the period 1855–1955.

Institution One: Reliance on Private Contractors for Peacetime Military Procurement

As The Business of Armaments shows, for a century Armstrongs and Vickers lurched between famines and feasts in the domestic market. During peacetime periods the British government minimized orders to private firms

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3 Brunton, “An Historical Perspective.”
until the onset of the Cold War demanded a consistently higher level of mobilization. That said, as developments in armor and guns for warships accelerated, the Admiralty had moved to procuring significantly more from armament firms than from the Royal Dockyards. From 1897 to 1914 J. D. Scott put the ratio at two private warships to one from the Royal Dockyards. Nevertheless, if funds were scarce (as they often were, relatively speaking, in times of peace), and procurement was low, the firms got few orders and the Admiralty sought to secure monies for the Royal Dockyards. As was shown, the War Office did not rely on private firms during times of peace, instead relying on the Royal Arsenals (who were often hopelessly out of date). During the inter-war period as the military aircraft market evaporated and the civilian market proved inadequate to sustain capacity, the Air Ministry began subsidizing “the family” of sixteen aircraft firms and four engine firms. Notably, Vickers Supermarine was not in the family. Thus, the picture of peacetime procurement is mixed, and reflects the organizational preferences of the services discussed above and in *The Business of Armaments* (26-29).

**Institution Two: The Revolving Door**

Armstrongs certainly used the tactic of supplying talent for the position as the Admiralty Director of Naval Construction (DNC), providing three successive DNCs between 1885 and 1924 (William Henry White, Philip Watts, Eustace Tennyson d’Eynecourt), the latter two returning to the firm after their government service. Despite this, after 1900 Armstrongs was less successful at securing Admiralty contracts, losing out to Vickers who, though they had no such connections, did have better priced, innovative products. Unfortunately for Armstrongs, these connections did not preclude them going out of business in the interwar period (and being roundly criticized by the First Lord of the Admiralty for their failure to act), something that elite connections would be expected to have forestalled (140).

For Vickers, the door did not revolve, it was exit-only. Some personnel left the services and joined Vickers, for example, Trevor Dawson, and later Sir Herbert Lawrence and Sir Noel Birch joined Vickers-Armstrongs. The firms gave their best managers gratus to the state during the First and Second World Wars, putting patriotism above profit, but afterwards personnel from the firms and the government were happy to revert to the status quo. Thus, the “revolving door” component of a military industrial complex is not consistently found for this period in the British case.

**Institution Three: Defense Pressure Groups**

The major defense pressure groups to consider here include the Navy League and National League of Airmen. As noted, the Navy League was an effective pressure group (348). It was a membership organization established in 1895 which sought to interest youth in the Navy and from the early twentieth century “aimed to gain support from working-class communities.” With a reference to contemporary debates in the 1930s, Arthur Marder considered the issues of whether the armament firms had given money to the Navy League and whether their shareholders were on the League’s membership rolls, concluding that “so far as the British

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Navy league is concerned, at any rate in its early years, I have been unable to unearth a shred of evidence to support these charges.”7 David Stevenson concurs in this judgement.8

During the period of the Royal Commission (Bankes Commission) hearings, allegations were made in the press that Vickers-Armstrongs was a member of several lobbying organizations, including the Navy League and the National League of Airmen. However, in the case of the latter, the Secretary of the National League of Airmen, Mr. G.E.D. Billam, wrote to the Commission to correct the record. He noted the press allegation that “Messrs. Vickers, Limited, subscribed about £250 per annum to the funds of the Air League” then explained that this could not refer to their organization. He wrote that “from its inception the National League of Airmen has refused on principle to accept any director or member of staff of the aircraft trade into any category of membership, and has not accepted, nor will accept, any subscriptions or donations whatsoever from any person or company engaged in the air manufacturing trade, other than air pilots and ordinary employees on a wage earning basis.”9

There were also institutions such as the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), where inventors could give papers—as Hiram Maxim did rather boastfully in December 1896 on the topic of “The Development of the Automatic Gun.”10 The members were current and former military officers, so this was a way to inform the services of new developments. This seems, however, to have operated more as a learned society than a lobby per se.

What about any broader lobbying behavior by the firms? Cooper notes that “…members of the Commons and Lords were courted by industry and used to lobby government (indeed Stuart Rendel of Armstrongs became an MP in 1880).” On the face of it, this evidence seems to support the idea of a British military industrial complex. However, the issue needs further interrogating.

First, was it unusual for Members of Parliament to be courted by local industries? It was not. In fact, it was common across sectors such as the railways, cotton, wool, ship building, and mining for local businesses to enlist the support of local Members of Parliament (who wanted to support the interests of their constituents—both businesses and/or trade unions—to retain their Parliamentary seats). An example of earlier lobbying activity involved interests connected to the production of wool, woolen yarn, and woolen cloth and (later) cotton, seeking the support of members of the Houses of Commons and the Upper House to protect these domestic trades against foreign competition.11 That armament firms engaged in what was common practice at the time does not in itself help the case for a British military industrial complex.

7 Arthur J. Marder, “The English Armament Industry and Navalism in the Nineties,” Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 1938): 241-253, 246. Notably, in this piece Marder does find that many MPs were shareholders in various armament firms, including Joseph and Austen Chamberlain (248) and that12-15 sat on boards in 1898, which would include Stuart Rendel at Armstrongs.
10 His lecture was reported on and critiqued by the Admiralty and Horse Guards Gazette, December 17, 1896, 9-11. Thorsten Nordenfelt Papers. I am grateful to Ben Turnbull for sharing this article with me. Thorsten Nordenfelt himself had spoken at RUSI in February 1886. Royal United Services Institute Journal, Vol. 30, Issue 133 (February 5, 1886). 149-173.

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Second, what difference did it make that Armstrongs’ Director Stuart Rendel was successively in the House of Commons as the Member for the Welsh seat of Montgomeryshire (1880–1894) and then in the House of Lords (1894–1913) as a Liberal peer? Looking at the Parliamentary record *Hansard*, Stuart Rendel’s name features 94 times, many of them recording his Parliamentary voting record (which was consistently in line with that of the Liberal party, including on various defense estimates). He spoke only once on gun issues, during an 1881 Supply Committee debate on the Naval Estimates. Following a statement by the Secretary of the Admiralty, which had referenced the new lighter and more powerful armaments planned for a new warship, Rendel noted:

> That statement should give considerable food for reflection; for it thus appeared that, as far as armament was concerned, the whole British Navy might be considered only at half power according to the existing state of artillery. It was admitted that the gun was a primary element in the value of the ship; and it would seem indeed, now agreed that the ship was to be made for the gun, and not the gun for the ship. These admissions gave importance to the circumstance he wished to impress on the Committee—namely, that the advance of artillery rendered our existing naval armament obsolete. That being so, he [Rendel] was among those who had waited with great anxiety to hear what the Admiralty proposed to do in order to rehabilitate the Navy with respect to its guns; and he heard, with regret, the comparatively meagre measures which were to be taken, and the small extent to which the required rearmament of the Fleet was to be carried.  

He went on to bemoan that while innovative guns had been developed three years ago (no doubt by Armstrongs), the War Office, which had responsibility for Naval Ordnance, had not acted and the nation had lost that time advantage to continental competitors. He concluded by saying that “he hoped that the knowledge of these facts would stimulate the demands of the Admiralty upon the War Office, and induce it to ask for something more of what the hon. Member (Mr. Trevelyan) called the generous treatment of the War Office.”

This is clear evidence of Stuart Rendel representing the interests of Armstrongs—and potentially the Navy—but it is the only instance out of his thirty-three-year career in Parliament. To contextualize the value of Rendel’s intervention, during that same debate, Mr. Gorst observed that: “Discussions upon the Naval Estimates [in the Supply Committee] were looked upon by the Admiralty authorities with the most profound contempt, and the proceedings of this evening were only an example of the sort of proceedings that had taken place in Committee of Supply on the Naval Estimates for a very large number of years past.” He further noted that “Very few private Members of the House ventured to make any independent observations upon the Estimates, which, they knew full well, were treated with more or less contempt, and which did not produce the slightest effect whatever on the administration of the Admiralty.”

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14 By contrast, he spoke on Welsh issues at least seven times, including sponsoring legislation on intermediate education in Wales.

A lot of what the two firms tried to do in terms of lobbying on domestic issues just did not work. For example, in noting comparisons to the present-day behavior of defense firms, Stavrianakis quotes the case of Sir Noel Birch, who suggested to Sir Charles Craven: “get Bromley to ask [Labour MP James Henry] Thomas up to Barrow and stuff him full of wine and cigars for a week!” (162-3) The issue was whether a future Labour government would allow the firm to exhibit at a planned armament exhibition in Buenos Aires.\(^\text{16}\) However, this did not succeed, as Bromley had suggested to Birch even as he set up the MP’s visit, and Vickers-Armstrongs do not seem to have been at the 1931 British Empire Trade Exhibition in Buenos Aires, even though the exhibition was inaugurated by the Prince of Wales and Britain sent an aircraft carrier.\(^\text{17}\)

While the firms received somewhat more assistance in their search for overseas sales, as detailed in part two of the book, even then there were cases where Vickers-Armstrongs’ connections did not produce the outcome they desired, including unsuccessfully lobbying the prime minister and cabinet secretary to head off an embargo over arms sales to Japan in 1933 (161). This speaks to an issue raised by Barton: were the British firms and the state as closely aligned as American firms and government officials assumed? The instances from 1925 which she references show on the one hand the British government’s zealous regulation of arms exports to Brazil. However, on the other hand, on the question of support to armament firms, while firms such as Colt complained that others got more help, British firms made the same complaint to the British government about their foreign competitors. This is a game that all the firms played; complaining that their international competitors got (or get—it still happens today) more help from their home state than they do.

**Institution Four: The Preparedness Ethos**

Brunton describes this as “the idea that during peacetime the country should be constantly prepared for war has become a habit of thought.”\(^\text{18}\) In some sense the uncontested acceptance of “preparedness” would equate to an exhibition of “ideological power,” by the firms and the state, a situation in which an approach that favors their interests is so ingrained in thought that it is not seriously questioned (13, 349).

Is this preparedness ethos in evidence in the British case? I conclude that it is not consistently evident during the period 1855–1955. If “preparedness” was a core ethos and habit of thought, the British government would not have been scrambling to such an extent to prepare for the Boer War, the Great War, the Second World War and even the Korean War. If preparedness were the key value, then armament spending levels would be expected to have been maintained more consistently. The domestic support for naval arms control and opposition to the activities of armament firms during the inter-war period suggests that there was no

\(^{16}\) Noel Birch to Charles Craven, July 6, 1929. Vickers Archive, VA Microfilm R 286.

\(^{17}\) “Inglaterra Exposición Británica en la Argentina, 1931.” Archive of E. E. Haynes, Buenos Aires, The Haynes archive contains clippings on the British Empire Trade Exhibition from Argentinian newspapers, which, despite copious coverage, make no mention of Vickers-Armstrongs nor shows any pictures of military materiel. There is photographic evidence of the presence of British firms involved in railways, motor car production, pottery and china, textiles, and clothing, but nothing relating to armaments. One photograph records the presence among a group of delegates and exhibitors of Mr. R. Carlisle, MC of Sir W. G. Armstrong Whitworth Ltd (the rump of the firm not part of the amalgamated Vickers-Armstrongs). Held in the Endangered Archives Programme, British Library. At: [https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP375-1-1-117](https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP375-1-1-117); “Big Aircraft Carrier will go to Argentina,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1931, 9.

\(^{18}\) Brunton, “An Historical Perspective.”
dominant ethos of “preparedness,” that other values were in the minds of war-weary publics, and that the firms were fighting to survive because a preparedness ethos was lacking.

Institution Five: State Support of Strategic Industry

The position of the state on support to armaments firms changed considerably over the period covered in *The Business of Armaments*. While laissez-faire determined that there was initially no research and development support for firms (who therefore added R&D costs into the prices they hoped to charge), over time the position changed. British government support for armament firms began episodically, initially with acceptance of a naval “ring,” then some limited support for armor producers, followed by inter-war support to aircraft makers in “the family” etc. From the 1930s there was also more support for the military research and development activities of firms. This support grew significantly during the Second World War and was maintained into the Cold War era. Over time state support of strategic industries developed, but it was not a major characteristic of the first seventy years covered in the book.

How then does the case for a British military industrial complex look in light of this typology? For me, these five “institutions” are not consistently and dominantly present in Britain between 1855 and 1955. While some of the institutions are present to tick a box (a revolving door, defense pressure groups), the evidence of their impact is insufficient to make the case for a British military industrial complex.

Turning to the empire, Stavrianakis asks interesting questions about the role of empire in the thinking and activities of Armstrongs and Vickers. It is worth noting that of the 3,048 major documents in the Vickers Archive (which covers Vickers-Armstrongs too) not one is dedicated to sales to the empire. This reflects the reality that defense of the empire—and procurement—was in the hands of the British military services. Members of the empire and other European colonies only became interesting to the firms when there were opportunities for local procurement. For example, in 1929 (when finances were particularly bad at the newly amalgamated Vickers-Armstrongs) the firm tendered for an African air service contract. This was for a proposed flying-boat service between Dakar to Angola, with Vickers Supermarine offering their *Solent* flying boats fitted with *Jaguar* engines.¹⁹ The air service did not come to fruition.

The focus on opportunities for sales meant that the dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were of increasing interest to the two firms, and, as Stavrianakis notes, played a role in Armstrongs’ downfall. Armstrongs and Vickers only really began to engage with empire and the dominions during the inter-war period, and it was disastrous for the firms because they moved into civilian industries which they did neither understand nor necessarily had aptitude for, rather than due to any characteristic of the empire.

Looking specifically at the “Jewel in the Crown” of the empire, once India came under the direct control of the Crown in 1858, British parsimony had dictated the abolition of India’s 64-vessel navy, and naval defense became the responsibility of the Royal Navy (and therefore fell under Admiralty and War Office procurement). The armies inherited from the British East India Company (an interesting but sui generis story of firm independence) were now focused on internal security and frontier defense.²⁰ After Herbert Horatio Kitchener became commander-in-chief in 1902, he enhanced the Army’s focus on maximum self-sufficiency with “the construction of a gun carriage factory at Jubbulpore, a cordite factory at Aruvankadu, a lyddite-

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filling plant at Kirki, and rolling mills and a rifle factory at Ishapore.”

Additional Indian artillery needs were met through the War Office, which was never a fan of the firms, and the Royal Arsenals, so Armstrong and Vickers were largely bystanders. However, by 1937 the Nepalese delegation in London was requesting that Vickers-Armstrongs supply it with 50 Mark III Vickers Berthier guns.

On Stavrianakis’s question about the activities of Vickers (Eastern), it seems that this branch of Vickers (that is, not Vickers-Armstrongs but the civilian firm that was not part of the amalgamation) was established in the run-up to independence (August 1947), when the Indian government would be making more procurement decisions. After the bloody partition, Vickers (Eastern), was also engaged in providing civilian airliners and tractors (that is, tanks repurposed as tractors) to Pakistan, and in 1958 Vickers-Armstrongs’ Elswick yard launched the INS frigate Beas for the Indian Navy. Beyond the period covered in the book, in 1960 Vickers-Armstrongs was contracted by India to build a factory to produced medium Chieftain tanks that were to be modified to Indian specifications.

Picking up on another aspect of empire, I completely agree with Cooper that “…the philosophy of laissez faire that operated with regards to peacetime arms exports from Britain was substantially modified when it came to controlling arms flows into, between, and within, colonial spaces.” This is an important point, but this double standard minimally affected the two firms, who were generally focused on the more profitable heavy weapons, warships etc. rather than small arms. One area of business that was affected by colonial export controls, however, was the machine gun business, and particularly Vickers involvement with the phenomenally successful Maxim machine gun.

In 1897 Vickers bought the financially ailing Maxim Nordenfelt Machine Gun Company limited for £1.35 million, following a decade of Albert Vickers’ involvement with the firm. In the same year the Admiralty bought three Maxim machine guns and one was used in the Gold Coast (now Sierra Leone) to rout a rebellious group. In 1898 the British military under Kitchener were using Maxim guns in Sudan, mowing down cavalry charges, acts that were observed by a horrified young reporter named Winston Churchill.

During the Second Anglo-Boer War, Imperial troops were victims of the Boer’s Maxim guns and losses were very high. The British government obviously did not want to sacrifice this battlefield advantage via exports to the colonial territories. Vickers was mindful of the British government’s concerns. A 1901 agreement with Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabriken (DWM, previously Ludwig Loewe and Company) to manufacture and sell automatic and semi-automatic guns of 37 mm and under in Germany also licensed DWM to sell them to any government “outside the British Empire, France and the colonies and the United States.” These exclusions show that British colonial concerns were adhered to. However, after the agreement between

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21 Kavic, *India’s Quest*, 11.
28 Scott, *Vickers*, 87-88. Of course, DWM manufactured machine guns for the German war effort, leading to a dispute over profits due to both firms on war sales, eventually when a stalemate was reached in the Enemy Debt Clearing House, each firms withdrew the claims against the other. Scott, *Vickers*, 149-50.
DWM and Vickers lapsed, the German firm freely sold its versions of Maxim guns around the world, something that Vickers seems to have been powerless to prevent.

Finally, Barton asked about intelligence. What I found in the archives of the firms and the British government is in the book, but perhaps there is more to glean from still-classified sources. As is often the case, a juicy morsel of information falls in your lap after a book is published, and this morsel speaks to Barton’s question. A recent conversation with an expert on Romania revealed his belief that in the 1930s and 1940s military officers went into Eastern Europe to gather intelligence under the cloak of working for Vickers-Armstrongs. This included Major Edwin Boxshall, who had been a British intelligence officer during the Great War. Boxshall was active for Vickers (and later Vickers-Armstrongs) in Romania from 1919, and apparently also for the British state. Boxshall subsequently played important roles in running undercover agents in Nazi-held Romania for the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the Second World War. This suggests that the tradition of intelligence sharing begun by Vickers had morphed into a substantive connection with the British state in the run-up to and prosecution of World War II. This in turn suggests interesting avenues for future research—and Freedom of Information Requests.

Once again, I would like to thank my colleagues for this interesting discussion.

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29 Dennis Deletant, *British Clandestine Activities in Romania During the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), XI.