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MELVIN GOODMAN

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When Musk Invades the Pentagon



Artwork by Nathaniel St. Clair

In an oped in the Washington Post this week, former secretary of the navy Richard Danzig recommended deploying Elon Musk and his team from the Department of Government Efficiency to the Pentagon “not with a view to cutting costs,” but to “increase effectiveness” of our weapons systems. Danzig believes that “our first national security priority should not be to cut costs.” I believe that we can do both.

Musk does have an important record in the space and automotive fields to “apply technology to solve old problems in new ways.” However, he has a major conflict of interest, earning billions of dollars for himself from Pentagon grants and favoring increased defense spending. The United States spends as much on national defense as the rest of the world. At this moment, the United States is spending nearly \$900 billion at the Pentagon, and an additional \$400 billion at such key institutions as Veterans’ Administration; Department of Homeland Security; Department of Energy; and the Intelligence Community. Hundreds of billions of

dollars could be saved with reasonable cuts in weapons acquisition and closing a number of military bases and facilities the world over. The United States has over 700 bases and facilities world wide. China has one overseas base on the Horn of Africa; Russia has two in Syria that are threatened by the new government in Damascus that replaced 55 years of tyranny under the Assad family.

Every aspect of the Pentagon's budget, including research and development, procurement, operations and maintenance, and infrastructure needs to be scrutinized for additional savings. Capping increases in military pay would mean savings of \$17 billion, and freezing DoD civilian salaries for three years would save \$15 billion. Two additional drivers have been the cost of operations and procurement, which have been out of control over the past several years. There are huge logistical costs in transporting military equipment to our bases, particularly in countries with limited logistical infrastructure.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has concluded over the years that the "costs of developing and buying weapons have historically been, on average, 20-30 percent higher" than Pentagon estimates. Tens of billions are spent annually on Cold War systems ill-suited to the needs of the 21st century. The F-35 fighter jet, a costly and contentious program, was too sophisticated for use in either Iraq or Afghanistan. There is no better example of President Eisenhower's warning regarding the military industrial complex than the procurement history of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

Like the Marines' V-22 Osprey aircraft, the F-35 has been a troubled program, with cost overruns, military mismanagement, and no political scrutiny. The next generation of pilotless armed drones as well as hypersonic cruise missiles have more uses—and fewer costs—than several thousand sophisticated fighter aircraft. The F-35 variants for the Navy and Marines never should have been built. The drone, however, presents the same problem for the Air Force (no pilots) that Admiral Hyman Rickover's strategic submarines presented for the Navy (smaller crews, fewer officers).

The very existence of the Marine Corps is questionable. The Marines have not conducted an amphibious landing since the Korean War, more than 70 years ago, marking the only amphibious landing since World War II. There is no other nation in the world that has such a Corps in terms of numbers and capabilities. President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney tried to kill the Marines' Osprey program 35 years ago. The Marine response "bordered on insubordination," according to Richard Whittle, the author of the definitive book on the Osprey. The General Accountability Office has raised serious

questions about its ability to operate in “high-threat operations.” Meanwhile, the budget for the Marine Corps is nearly \$55 billion.

The key to cost savings in the defense arena would involve reducing nuclear forces. One of the best kept defense secrets of the past 75 years has been the high cost of producing and maintaining nuclear weapons. We have devoted more than \$7 trillion to nuclear weapons, which represents one-fourth to one-third of overall defense spending, and another trillion has been allocated for the next 7 years. When the United States initially began to develop nuclear weapons, the military-industrial complex stressed (falsely) that the huge investment in nuclear systems would be an overall savings because it would allow a smaller army and navy. Meanwhile, our army (\$180 billion) and navy (\$230 billion) have gotten larger and costlier for taxpayers.

While the Trump administration moves to destroy the Agency for International Development and its important economic assistance programs, a variety of military assistance programs continue to grow. The United States dominates the sale of weapons overseas, which represents one more aspect of the military-industrial-congressional complex. Israel and Egypt get \$4 billion in military assistance, although their serious human rights violations should prevent any U.S. military assistance. One purpose of military assistance is to contribute to regional stability, which has hardly been the case in the Middle East. Military assistance has been particularly ineffective in fighting the war against terror.

Sixty-five years after Eisenhower’s warning about the military-industrial complex, the United States must come to terms with its elevation of the role of the military; its cult of military spending that has become sacrosanct; and a culture of militarism that has placed U.S. bases all over the globe. Eisenhower’s warning about the dangers of our “cross of iron” militarism has never been more apparent or more threatening to the American way of life.

Finally, what will happen to defense spending if Trump follows through on his acquisitions regarding Canada, Greenland, the Panama Canal, and now Gaza. As for sending Elon Musk and his kids into the Pentagon: What could go wrong?

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Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of [Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA](#) and [National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism](#). and [A Whistleblower at the CIA](#). His most recent books are “American Carnage: The

Wars of Donald Trump” (Opus Publishing, 2019) and “Containing the National Security State” (Opus Publishing, 2021). Goodman is the national security columnist for counterpunch.org.