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## Military-Industrial Election

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos  
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WASHINGTON—Like all special interests in the nation’s capital, the defense industry is spending millions of dollars this election season to ensure a front-row spot at the federal trough—and in the case of the most powerful military-industrial contractors, a chance to influence the national-security policies that will keep production lines humming and profit margins growing.

Defense contractors took a keen interest in the Republican and Democratic primaries, backing candidates for reasons both ideological and commercial. How they will divide their dollars between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the general election remains to be seen, though there are reasons to think one of the major-party nominees will be especially receptive to industry support. For the military-industrial complex, however, the race for the White House is not the whole story—and in the ways that matter most, this year’s elections mean business as usual.

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By April 30, the defense sector had given more than \$1.6 million to the broad field of presidential candidates. Among all the 2016 hopefuls, Ted Cruz was the recipient of the most defense-industry dollars, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Cruz received a total of \$343,000, followed—perhaps surprisingly—by Bernie Sanders with \$323,000, and then Hillary Clinton with more than \$273,000.

Sanders's place at the top of the Democratic heap in terms of defense-sector support may seem odd for a man who attacked Clinton's support for overseas military interventions. But it's not so strange at all when one considers that the controversial F-35 Joint Strike Fighter—the most expensive aircraft in U.S. history, and more than a decade overdue—underwent development in Sanders's home state of Vermont.

Lockheed, the maker of the F-35 and the biggest recipient of Pentagon contracts in 2015, gave Sanders \$36,600 through March. He also got more money from Boeing than Clinton—nearly \$46,000 in that period, according to Alexander Cohen of the Center for Public Integrity.

Meanwhile, according to Federal Election Commission (FEC) filings, Donald Trump, by then already the presumptive Republican nominee, had received only \$17,818 as of May. Republican dropouts Jeb Bush (\$212,108) and Lindsey Graham (\$135,925) filled out the top five this spring, under Cruz, Sanders, and Clinton.

While the total figure for defense corporations' giving directly to presidential candidates was just \$1.65 million as of the end of April, that number does not count the companies' political action committees, which pour cash into presidential coffers and, even more so, those of congressional candidates and party committees. Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman have PACs that rank among the wealthiest in the industry. Lockheed's PAC, which spread around over \$1.6 million for federal candidates this spring, had given \$10,000 to Cruz by the end of March. Northrop Grumman's PAC, on the other hand, gave all of its \$1.5 million as of March to House and Senate candidates—mostly Republicans.

Over and above ordinary PAC spending, the 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision allows for unlimited contributions to super PACs from corporations. “Now [that special interests] can spend as much money as they want, I think you will find more lopsided contributions,” notes Pierre Sprey, a defense analyst and critic who spoke with *TAC*. “This is a huge sword hanging over the heads of the candidates.” And although Super PACs must ultimately disclose their donors to the FEC, issue-oriented nonprofits need not do so, and they too can be tools of defense-industry influence on public opinion. The overall picture of how defense dollars shape politics is shadowy—but what we can see is telling.



Now that the primaries are over, the question is whether defense dollars will favor Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. In recent cycles, Republican nominees have received more contributions from the sector than Democrats have. That might change this year, both because Trump has been slow to build a fundraising base among special interests—whose money he turned down during the primary season—and because Clinton has a candidate profile that seems like an especially good fit for military industries.

When asked this spring about the campaign by ABC's Martha Raddatz, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said of Clinton, with classic understatement, “I think that she probably would be somewhat more hawkish than President Obama.”

As secretary of state, Clinton worked with Gates and David Petraeus, the director of the CIA at the time, to push for more aggressive intervention against the Assad government in Syria. She led the charge into Libya—now a roiling mess of dysfunction and a waystation for many Islamic fighters in the region. Clinton’s support for military intervention goes much farther back than that, however. History has her behind the scenes in her husband Bill Clinton’s administration, along with then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, pressing for an early bombing campaign in Bosnia in 1993.

“Hillary Clinton has been part of the Washington establishment for a quarter century. I think the defense contractors likely view her as a known quantity,” says Dan Grazier, retired Marine Corps captain, Iraq veteran, and now a senior military analyst at the Project for Government Oversight. “And she does have a hawkish reputation, which is obviously good for their bottom line.”

In a *New York Times* story titled “How Hillary Became a Hawk,” correspondent Mark Landler described the occasion when Gates and Pacific Commander Adm. Robert Willard were pushing for the *USS George Washington* to steer an aggressive course into the Yellow Sea after the North Koreans torpedoed a South Korean ship in 2010, killing 46 on board. “We’ve got to run it up the gut!” Clinton reportedly said in agreement, getting an admiring chuckle from her staff for the quick football analogy. Obama chose not to take her advice. Nor did he take it when she had recommended a year earlier that he approve Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s request for 40,000 more troops in Afghanistan.

As Landler’s story makes clear, Clinton has had an unusually accommodating relationship with generals and top civilian brass. She has always been portrayed as a sympathetic partner, an enabler-in-waiting. To the wider national-security establishment, she is clearly “of the body.”

“She believes, like presidents going back to the Reagan or Kennedy years, in the importance of the military—in solving terrorism, in asserting American influence,” Vali Nasr, Clinton’s former advisor at the State Department, told Landler.

So she naturally ranks high with the military-industrial complex too. Not only does she represent the status quo—or something more than the status quo—with respect to military spending and operations, she has been favored by the political class to win from the beginning. “In that, the contractors probably view their contributions to her campaign as a safe bet,” Dan Grazier told *TAC*.

Trump, on the other hand, is an unknown quantity who until recently eschewed special-interest funding, and his take from the defense industry during the primaries was correspondingly paltry. But that may change.

After all, with billions at stake, defense companies have incentives to hedge their bets. According to the website *Defense News*, the Pentagon’s top 100 contractors brought in a total of \$175.1 billion in 2015. Lockheed Martin was the largest single contractor for the U.S. government last year, raking in \$36.2 billion in federal contracts, followed by Boeing at \$16.6 billion, General Dynamics with \$13.6 billion, Raytheon with \$13.1 billion, and Northrop Grumman with \$10.6 billion.

But if the defense industry has to “give a little to get a little”—or give a lot to get a lot—contributions to presidential candidates aren’t necessarily what deliver the most bang for the military-industrial buck.



The defense industry is in fact a relatively marginal player in the presidential contest, at least from what the visible paper trail shows. Hillary Clinton is far more reliant on resources from the securities and investment industry. The war machine doesn’t even crack her top-20 list of contributors, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

That’s because the defense sector spends its money elsewhere. By putting their cash into Congress, defense industries can elect and influence legislators who will remain in Washington far longer than any president. Congress is where the action is: defense executives and their lobbyists work with the elected officials beholden to them to write bills, pad budgets, and shift contract work into specific legislators’ districts to ensure that projects will be funded and otherwise supported over the long haul.

“The arms manufacturers are putting a lot of money” into presidential candidates, says Pierre Sprey, “but it’s nothing compared to the day-in, day-out money they’re giving to Congress.” Simply put, Congress is a better investment.

“Congress can undo any administration decision that Boeing or Lockheed doesn’t like,” Sprey observes. “Defense contractors have enormous influence in shaping the secretary of defense’s decisions, but if the secretary happens to do something that displeases the industry, they will get Congress to undo that too, taking advantage of the broad leverage the companies have bought by spreading subcontracts across 48 states, by contributing generously to key committee congressmen, and by unleashing armies of lobbyists and paid-for think-tank pundits.”

Government watchdogs who spoke with *TAC* say that the defense contracting community focuses about as much of its attention on the authorizers—the Senate and House Armed Services Committees—as on the appropriators. That’s because the real payoff for defense contributions is in getting programs—weapon systems, vehicles, aircraft, ships, drones, nuclear armaments and all of the requisite technology—approved in the defense policy bills each year.

“As authorizers, they have a lot of capacity to at least start making the arguments [on behalf of defense contractors], even if they can’t necessarily put the money into the account,” says Mandy Smithberger, military-reform analyst for the Project for Government Oversight.

So far in the 2016 cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Government, the defense sector spent over \$17 million, the vast majority going to House and Senate candidates and party committees. The split is pretty uneven—63 percent of the cash goes to Republicans, 36 percent to Democrats—largely because the Republicans are in charge of both the House and Senate.

The top of the list? Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), new chair of the House Armed Services Committee, who had received at least \$308,000 as of April. According to the Center for Public

Integrity's Alexander Cohen, Thornberry—who has been in office 21 years—received a total of \$933,415 from the largest 75 defense companies over his last decade on the committee.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, comes in third on the list, with \$265,450 as of this writing. The next Republican after him is a top F-35 proponent, Rep. Randy Forbes (R-Va.), chairman of the HASC Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, who raked in \$181,950. He's followed by Sen. Richard Shelby (R-Ala.), chair of the Senate Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, with \$166,700.

They may not all be household names, but to the defense sector they are veritable golden geese.

Cohen says the defense sector sprinkles plenty of green on members who sit on the joint House-Senate conference committee, too. This panel hashes out the final details of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), and its 48 members—34 of them from the HASC and SASC—got, in all, no less than \$20.6 million in contributions from defense contractors and their employees between 2003 to 2014, four times as much as members of the Armed Services committees who were not appointed as conferees.

The HASC recently passed its 2017 NDAA, calling for a \$583 billion hike in spending, including such line items as 11 more F-35s and a \$2 billion boost to the Navy's shipbuilding budget. According to an Associated Press report, the committee members calling for this \$18 billion increase have received \$10 million over the course of their careers from defense contractors who "would benefit from higher levels of military spending." The House Appropriations Committee sent a lower budget figure, \$575.5 billion, to the floor in May, but critics warn of tricky accounting: the House Appropriations plan uses wartime contingency funds to get around funding caps for baseline budgeting.



Defense contractors and their surrogates—who include not only lawmakers but also lobbyists and analysts from think tanks that represent the industry on Capitol Hill—say the big fight in 2017 will be getting rid of those spending caps, which were put into place under the Budget Control Act (BCA), the "sequester" of 2011.

"Absolutely," says Dave Deptula, executive director of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, a nonprofit think tank that advances Air Force interests, including the F-35, in Washington. The BCA, he says, "is undercutting our capabilities and should be eliminated." He contends that readiness and capital projects have been sacrificed under the caps. "What we did to our Air Force and our military writ large was what our enemies could only hope to achieve."

Mandy Smithberger replies that industry backers like Deptula overstate the austerity imposed by the budget controls. Such friends of the industry, she contends, demand gold-plated programs that actually divert money away from less expensive and more capable alternatives.

"Lockheed's investments [in Congress] have definitely paid off when it comes to F-35 in the defense bill every year," says Smithberger. The company, which has contributed over \$15

million to congressional races since 2006, ensures that the F-35 dollars keep coming by splitting up subcontracts—with each subcontractor responsible for making a different piece—across hundreds of congressional districts. Jobs in those districts are leverage for Lockheed Martin. “The F-35 is in 46 different states and 350 districts,” Smithburger says. “That is a lot of political support for one program.”

Even when the Department of Defense asks for something else, lawmakers in the pocket of contractors make sure the companies’ pet projects are funded anyway. And the corruption is getting worse.

“It used to be that members of congress would pork themselves up only for contracts that had a significant impact in their state or district,” says defense analyst and former GAO researcher Winslow Wheeler. “That day is long gone. Members squabble for ‘credit’ even for the tiniest level of spending in their political jurisdiction, to say nothing of going along with anything produced anywhere by anyone if there is the slightest prospect—always rewarded—of a contribution.”

Because of this entrenchment, little will change next year no matter who wins the White House, says Dan Grazier. “My natural cynicism is telling me there won’t be any difference between this year and the next.” That’s what the industry is counting on.