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Why the War Machine Keeps on Running

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The United States has always meddled in other people's affairs. For those readers who think this statement is an exaggeration, I urge them to peruse the chronology of interventions compiled by the Congressional Research Service. This historical predilection for meddling, however, grew enormously in depth and breadth during the Cold War, and to make matters worse, it is now clear that it exploded after the end of the Cold War.

The Bush-Obama perpetual war on terror is now the longest and second most expensive war in US history, exceeded only in cost by WWII, even if one removes the effects of inflation from the comparison. And this war comes on top of the incessant warmongering during the 1990s, including the bombing of air defense sites in Iraq, the drive by shootings with cruise missiles in the Sudan and Afghanistan, and the bombing in Bosnia and Kosovo during the Wars of the Yugoslavian Succession. Anyone who opposes the meddling and warmongering is labeled an isolationist by the defenders of the status quo, like Senators McCain, Graham, and Lieberman. But this is absurd name calling, as Sheldon Richman cogently explains in this essay. This absurdity of the isolationist label has a long lineage dating back to the misrepresentations by so-called 'internationalists' -- ironically, liberal mostly democrats -- of the foreign policy views of Senator Robert A. Taft in the 1940s and 1950s.

Today, the United States is locked in a throes of perpetual war, and our politics are dominated by its political handmaiden, perpetual fear. If you doubt this, just think about the recent expansion of drone assaults to Libya and Somalia or your next invasive pat down in an airport or the continuation of the onerous Patriot Act. Some critics believe perpetual war is driven primarily by the lust for empire. No doubt, empire lusting is a factor, but for the reasons I explained in *The Domestic Roots of Perpetual War*, I believe perpetual war is primarily the issue of a deadly mutation of domestic politics, particularly the imperative to prop up a sclerotic Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex (MICC) -- a political-economic faction that lost its *raison d'être* when the Cold War ended, and now needs the perpetual threat of war, to pump money through it, if it is to survive and flourish on its own terms, at the expense of others.

The distorting powers of domestic political faction (described elegantly in Madison's Federalist Paper #10) and executive warmongering were the two great fears of the Framers of the Constitution. The Constitution's system of checks and balances was designed around the idea of preventing the rise of an all-powerful domestic faction and curbing the power of the executive to unilaterally declare war. The emergence of the Cold War, especially with Truman's signing NSC-68 in August 1950, which established the political template for equating military strategy to arms production and economic policy to Military Keynesianism, institutionalized the MICC as a permanent player in the US political economy.

It is clear the Framers of the Constitution would have considered the MICC to be the most dangerous of all factions, because the MICC has seamlessly synthesized both fears: It is an all-powerful domestic faction whose self interest is to promote war or the perpetual threat of war.

Why do I use the modifier "all powerful"?

One need only to consider the conditions surrounding the current paralysis in our government to sense the MICC's ubiquitous power: Today, what's left of our constitutional system cannot muster the political will to stop the ongoing succession of wars, despite polls suggesting a majority of Americans want these wars to stop. Nor will Congress make a significant reduction in the defense budget, even though it is at a post-WWII high, there is no superpower threat this level of expenditure, only a small part of the defense budget is funding the ongoing wars, and there is now a political majority in favor of cutting federal spending to reduce the deficit. Moreover, the President and Congress cannot or will not stop either the war or the defense spending binge despite the facts that (1) there is widespread knowledge of horrendous waste and excessive profiteering in the defense budget; (2) it is a well established fact that a dollar of defense spending creates fewer jobs than just about any other kind of spending, yet job creation is the central need of a stagnating American economy on the cusp of a double dip recession; (3) the fact that the members of Defense Department hold the Accountability and Appropriations clauses of the Constitution in contempt, because they can not and will not account for how they spend the money Congress appropriates for it -- a refusal that occurs despite the fact that every member of the Defense Department has taken a sacred oath to uphold and defend the Constitution; and (4) the members of Congress either refuse or are afraid to exercise their duty to enforce that accountability under the powers assigned to it under Article 1 of the Constitution.

And why is the government paralyzed?

The political system is paralyzed for the simple reason that the gamesters in the MICC have deliberately paralyzed it by playing the defense power games which I have explained here and here. On the other hand, the iron triangle of a large standing military, an outsized industrial base of defense contractors, and their network of wholly owned subsidiaries in Congress is less of a simple conspiracy than an emergent complex adaptive system that self organizes its order by processing the flow of money through itself and expels disorder -- taking the form of paralyzing those trying to control it -- into its environment. The MICC in its current form (i.e., a large standing military, a large contractor base, and its widespread congressional patronage network) cannot survive without war or the threat of war to lubricate the continuing money flow it requires like a body requires food for energy. The entire structure in its current form cannot survive or reform itself for the simple reason its defense contractor wing knows full well it cannot convert to the production of commercially viable products at competitive prices. So without a paralysis of the larger governing system, the MICC could not protect and add to the money flowing through it, and without that continuing money flow, the whole self-organizing edifice of the MICC -- a large standing military, a huge contractor base, and hundreds of wholly owned legislators to dutifully shovel money to their districts -- would collapse into chaos, which some believe would bring down the US economy, which brings us full circle to the political entropy flowing out of the military Keynesianism that has grown and prospered since 1950, when President Truman signed NSC-68.

NSC-68 portrayed itself as a strategic blueprint for a long term confrontation with the Soviet Union. But it was first and foremost a plan for a huge weapons development and production program, and while its authors, led by arch cold warrior Paul Nitze, claimed to have compared the military and economic capabilities to the Soviet Union to the United States, NSC 68 rested on the intellectual bedrock of military Keynesianism.

In fact, language of NSC-68 asserted that increases in Pentagon spending would "increase the gross national product by more than the amount being absorbed for additional military and foreign assistance purposes." In effect, the authors of NSC-68, generalized the peculiar experience of WWII, by making an unconstrained claim that the defense build up would create so much economic stimulus that it would pay for itself -- in effect, promising a free lunch.

NSC 68 was more a marketing document than a strategy; it did not even contain any specific cost estimates or economic analysis to justify its claim of a free lunch. But by equating strategy to a weapons buildup, NSC 68 established the template for strategic planning that transformed George Kennan's political theory of containment into a military strategy grounded on weapons R&D and production. Ironically, while Kennan is remembered for his critiques of the militarization of his containment policy, he was one of the authors of NSC-68. Such an approach to "strategy" was realistic in one sense: it fit the domestic economic needs of the defense-dependent manufacturers, like the aircraft companies who needed federal subsidies to survive, as a hand fits a glove.

While Truman did not reject NSC-68, he sat on it. Then, on June 25, 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea and gave Truman the opportunity to approve NSC-68, and the MICC was off to the races.