

The “military-industrial complex” in power

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Fifty-six years ago, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered a farewell address in which he warned about the threat to democracy in the United States posed by the growing convergence between military and corporate power.

The outgoing president cautioned against the expanding and “total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government” of the “military-industrial complex.”

Eisenhower, himself a five-star general and commander of allied expeditionary forces in the Second World War, had firsthand knowledge of the operations of the military. But even at the height of the Cold War, the influence of the military over political life paled in comparison to what exists today. With each passing month, the military consolidates more power over civilian authority, while democratic forms of rule are increasingly hollowed out and rendered meaningless.

This was exemplified by Trump’s speech Monday announcing an open-ended expansion of the US war in Afghanistan. The setting itself was significant. Trump spoke at Fort Meyer Army Base in Virginia to an audience of troops decked out in combat fatigues. He made clear that the military leadership, without any civilian oversight or the fig-leaf of Congressional authorization, would determine how many additional troops would be sent to fight in Afghanistan, and how long they would stay there.

Over the past week, the Army and Marine officials in Trump’s cabinet—retired Gen. John Kelly, retired Gen. James Mattis and active duty Gen. H.R. McMaster—have used the crisis surrounding Trump’s endorsement of the neo-fascist rampage in Charlottesville, Virginia to strengthen the grip of the military over the government.

But these developments, which in any genuinely democratic society would be treated with profound

apprehension, have been welcomed by the “opposition” Democratic Party and its media mouthpieces.

On Wednesday, the *Washington Post* ran a lead article, “Military leaders consolidate power in Trump administration,” which noted that Trump’s elevation of a “cadre of current and retired generals” is “a striking departure for a country that for generations has positioned civilian leaders above and apart from the military.”

The *Post*, owned by billionaire Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and speaking for a substantial section of the US political establishment, presents the growing power of the military in the Trump administration as a positive development. It calls the generals “voices for moderation,” and presents them as “moral authorities” working to “guide” Trump away from “moves that they fear could have catastrophic consequences.”

It cites uncritically a member of a leading conservative think tank who declares, “The only chance we have of trying to keep this thing from blowing apart is some military discipline... It’s not military rule or a military coup.”

Along the same lines, Wednesday’s *New York Times* carried a column by Roger Cohen declaring that the generals are acting as the “adults in the room,” serving to “tether” Trump and “curtail his wilder instincts.” The military, Cohen writes, provides “something Trump will never have: a center of gravity.”

These pronouncements by the *Post* and the *Times* represent the consensus view of the ruling elite, and most particularly that of the Democratic Party, which has opposed Trump almost entirely on issues of foreign policy, criticizing his insufficient deference to the military and intelligence apparatus and his unwillingness to carry out a military escalation against Russia.

McMaster, Kelly and Mattis “are standouts of dependability in the face of rash and impulsive

conduct” on the part of Trump, Connecticut Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal told the *Post*. “There certainly has been a feeling among many of my colleagues that they are a steadying hand on the rudder.”

Another example of the convergence between the press and the military/intelligence establishment is an op-ed published Wednesday by Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times*’ chief foreign policy columnist. Friedman boasts of having “spent eight days traveling with the Air Force to all of its key forward bases in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates,” including a trip to a “strike cell” carrying out airstrikes in Iraq.

Friedman describes US air strikes in an urban area with undisguised enthusiasm. “Quickly, the smoke cleared and the 30-foot-wide building was smoldering rubble—but the two buildings to the sides were totally intact, so any civilians inside should be unhurt,” exults the *Times* columnist, without pondering the fate of any civilians who were in the building that was vaporized.

“This is the war in Iraq today in a nutshell,” he writes, suggesting that the American military as a true liberator focuses its energies on preventing civilian casualties. This criminal lie is, of course, contradicted by the reality of millions killed, wounded and uprooted by more than a quarter century of US wars in Iraq and surrounding countries in the oil-rich Middle East, including the recent leveling of Mosul. Unfortunately for Friedman and the *Times*, this panegyric to the moral purity of the American military appeared two days after a US air strike in Syria killed more than 40 civilians.

Friedman’s whitewashing of the homicidal activities of the US Air Force exemplifies the role of the press, led by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, as shameless cheerleaders for US military intervention, together with the major TV networks, which routinely present retired military officials as authorities on all questions of policy.

The prostitution of the press to the military is just one expression of the massive political influence of the US armed forces. The United States spends more on its military than the next 10 countries combined, and military spending soaks up more than half of discretionary spending by the federal government. There are some two million active and reserve military personnel, and millions more employed either directly

or indirectly by the intelligence agencies.

Local and state police across the country are being ever more tightly integrated with the military, in what Defense Department strategists call the “total army,” consisting of the military, police and intelligence forces. Police departments are being outfitted with military hardware and trained for urban warfare.

This “total army” has at its disposal the massive surveillance capabilities of the US intelligence apparatus, which can spy on nearly every phone call, text message or email all over the world.

The growth of the power of the military has been accompanied by its integration into the financial oligarchy, with hundreds of leading military figures receiving seven-figure incomes in the revolving door between the Pentagon, Wall Street and the defense industry.

The increasing power of the military over political life in the United States and its merging with the corporate/financial elite are the product of the protracted decay of American capitalism. A quarter century of unending war and decades of soaring social inequality have thoroughly eroded the social foundations of democratic forms of rule. Beyond the oligarchy itself, a privileged layer of the upper-middle class that forms the broader base of the Democratic Party has accrued significant wealth through the meteoric rise of stock prices, itself fueled by the destruction of working class living standards and imperialist aggression overseas.

America’s financial elite, increasingly unable to reconcile its domination of social life with democratic forms of government, feels that the ultimate backstop to its rule is military force. Despite the assurances of the *Post*, what is emerging *is* in fact direct rule by the military, allied with Wall Street and the CIA, with the civilian government functioning as a mere facade.



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