

The Liberal Complex

Idealism, not economics,
drives American militarism.

By Michael C. Desch

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER famously warned his fellow Americans about the pernicious influence of what he termed “the military-industrial complex.” This was, to be sure, an important speech for many reasons, not the least of which were its prescience about the challenges that U.S. preeminence would pose for our domestic liberties and the prudent counsel of restraint he proffered to protect them. But, ironically, its most famous line was wide of the mark in identifying the roots of America’s subsequent global overreach.

Eisenhower cautioned that the country needed to be careful in how it used its growing might. Recognizing the dark side of such unrivaled power, the retiring president warned against America’s “recurring temptation to feel that some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties.” He pointed to the need to strike a balance—to become a military superpower while not undermining our free-market economy and the liberty of our citizens.

The danger, in the old soldier’s view, was that we would give in to “the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.”

But the speech’s central contention—that the root of the imbalance between our capabilities and interests on the one hand, and our aspirations on the other, lay in an unholy alliance between militarism and capitalism—strikes me from the perspective of half a century later as misguided, and not only because its most oft-quoted phrase has become a staple of the anti-American Left. It was, after all, not generals and plutocrats who impelled us upon that imperial trajectory that Ike so presciently warned against. To understand what drove us to become a quasi-imperial power, we have to look to the role of our liberal political culture.

January 20, 2011 is the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s first and only inaugural speech, which contained many memorable phrases that would crystallize the bipartisan consensus in favor of an overly ambitious American foreign policy. In it, the new president promised to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” He enthusias-

tically welcomed “the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger.” These stirring sentiments would seduce Americans across the political spectrum, from human-rights liberals to neoconservatives, and lead them to coalesce behind a series of foreign-policy debacles from Vietnam to Iraq.

The problem with American liberalism, as the Harvard government professor Louis Hartz observed, is that it has a tendency toward excess in opposite directions: on the one hand, liberalism underestimates the difficulty of transforming the world in its own image because liberalism assumes that it is the natural culmination and aspiration of humanity—that it is, as Francis Fukuyama would later put it, “the end of history.” On the other hand, liberalism contains a deep fear of the non-liberal—whether a Communist/nationalist rebellion in Southeast Asia in the 1960s or an Islamicist rival today—and fosters the sense that America could never survive in the face of such opposition. In a classic manifestation of the hubris-nemesis complex, these two very different faces of American liberalism combine Janus-like to produce a self-righteous yet trembling colossus stumbling around the world.

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That liberalism—specifically a desire to spread democracy and protect human rights—was the fount of America’s most recent exercise in overreach, the Bush administration’s Iraq War, is controversial. But the argument that the military-industrial complex was behind it is even harder to sustain. It was, after all, the American oil industry that was most opposed to sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s, and the oil patch was hardly clamoring for war after 9/11.

Nor was the U.S. military itching for a fight with Saddam in the winter of 2003. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki’s doubts about Iraq being a “cakewalk” in which a handful of American troops could waltz in, oust Saddam, and leave the Iraqis to set up a Jeffersonian democracy were widely shared among senior military officers.

It was civilians in the second Bush administration, including the president himself, who raised these hopes, not only pub-

licly—where they buttressed other, less altruistic arguments for war such as Iraq’s purported support for terrorism and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction—but also in the most secret counsels of the White House and Pentagon, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz confessed to a reporter for *Vanity Fair*.

Bush himself outlined how he saw liberalism and America’s national interest being simultaneously served by the Iraq War:

A free, democratic, peaceful Iraq will not threaten America or our friends with illegal weapons. A free Iraq will not be a training ground for terrorists, or a funnel of money to terrorists, or provide weapons to terrorists who would be willing to use them to strike our country or allies. A free Iraq will not destabilize the Middle East. A free Iraq can set a hopeful example to the entire region and lead other nations to choose freedom. And as the pursuits of freedom replace hatred and resentment and terror in the Middle East, the American people will be more secure.

This rationale served not only to win many converts to the Iraq War among the American public—over 70 percent of whom supported it in March 2003—but its democratic and humanitarian elements also garnered support from the so-called liberal hawks on the Left who might not otherwise have hopped on the war’s bandwagon.

But the most compelling piece of evidence that liberalism plays a central role in sustaining a broad coalition for an expansive foreign policy is the fact that after campaigning on a platform of international restraint, President Barack Obama has subsequently embraced and expanded a longer-term commitment to nation-building in Afghanistan and is in many respects taking an even more aggressive stance toward waging the war against terrorism than his immediate predecessor did.

So on the 50th anniversary of Eisenhower’s Farewell Address, we should re-read the speech and celebrate it as a seminal conservative warning against foreign-policy mission-creep and as the Right’s most eloquent brief on behalf of a posture of strategic restraint.

But we must also acknowledge that its misguided warning about a mounting military-industrial complex gave aid and comfort to subsequent generations of leftist critics of American foreign policy and ignored the disconcerting truth that the roots of our subsequent problems actually lie right in the vital center of American politics, with our broadly liberal political tradition. That’s why we need to read it in conjunction with President Kennedy’s inaugural address three days later to grasp the origins of our current predicament. ■

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Science of Tyranny

Eisenhower identified more than one threat to the Republic.

By Patrick J. Deneen

THE FAREWELL ADDRESS is a short but profound masterpiece. Direct, compact, and riveting, in an economy of words it drives to the heart of America’s modern crisis: our loss of republican liberty in the name of power and liberation. Although Eisenhower’s admonitions about the rise of the military-industrial complex attract the most attention, equally worthy of note is his second theme, the dangers of the “technological revolution.”

America might be called the technological republic—born, nurtured, and raised to its mighty stature by its close affiliation with the modern scientific project. Befitting its creation during the Age of Reason, America’s heroes have often been its inventors and scientists, from Benjamin Franklin to Carl Sagan. If other nations can claim great theoreticians—the Darwins and Mendels and Heisenbergs—the reputation of American science lies more in its applications. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1835, “the more democratic, enlightened, and free a nation is, the greater will be the number of these interested promoters of scientific genius and the more will discoveries immediately applicable to productive industry confer on their authors gain, fame, and even power.”

The United States was self-consciously founded as a polity based upon technical knowledge. In the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton attributed the proposed Constitution’s inspiration to “the new science of politics,” premised upon “reflection and choice” and no longer relying upon the unconscious accumulation of ancient practice, prejudice, and tradition, which he equated with “accident and force.” Reflecting this modern faith, the Constitution has been described as “the machine that would go of itself,” and the colonial physician Benjamin Rush characterized its citizenry as “republican machines.”

Later, John Dewey would argue that democracy and science were effectively indistinguishable, both predicated upon unending experimentation and progress, both devoted to the expansion of human power. Today Americans have an overwhelmingly favorable attitude toward science and scientists, with 84 percent stating their view to be “mostly positive,” according to a 2009 Pew Research Center poll.

Yet American confidence in scientific progress is met by equally longstanding misgivings about the costs of technology upon nature, community, and the human soul. Early voices