

## What Happens When All We Have Left Is The Pentagon?

Posted by Joan Russow

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### Trump's Vision of a Militarized America

By [William D. Hartung](#)

At [over \\$600 billion](#) a year and counting, the Pentagon already receives significantly more than its fair share of federal funds. If President Donald Trump has his way, though, that will prove a sum for pikers and misers. He and his team are now promising that spending on defense and homeland security will increase dramatically in the years to come, even as domestic programs are slashed and entire civilian agencies shuttered.

The new administration is reportedly [considering](#) a plan -- modeled on proposals from the military-industrial-complex-backed Heritage Foundation -- that would cut a staggering \$10.5 trillion in federal spending over the next decade. The Departments of Energy, Commerce, Transportation, and State might see their budgets slashed to the bone; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting would be privatized; and (though the money involved would amount to chicken feed) the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities would be eliminated altogether. In the meantime, the ranks of the Army and Marines would be expanded, a huge naval buildup would be launched, and a new Star Wars-style missile defense system would be developed -- all at a combined [cost](#) of up to \$1 trillion beyond the already munificent current Pentagon plans for that same decade.

The specifics won't be known until Trump's first budget becomes public in perhaps April or May, but as we wait for it, Republican Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain has just taken the unusual step of releasing his own [spending blueprint](#) for the military. It suggests that a key senator and the president and his team are on the same page when it comes to military funding. At an extra \$430 billion over the next five years, the numbers in McCain's plan are similar to the potential Trump buildup.

One thing is already clear: this drastic tilt toward yet more Pentagon spending and away from investment in diplomacy abroad and civilian needs at home will only further militarize American society, accelerate inequality, and distort the country's already highly questionable foreign policy. After all, if your military is the only well-funded, well-stocked arm of the government, it's obvious whom you're going to turn to in any crisis.

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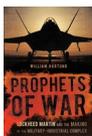
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This process was already visibly underway even before Donald Trump took the oath of office. His gut decision to entrust national security policymaking only to military figures was particularly troubling. From National Security Adviser Michael Flynn to Secretary of Defense James Mattis to head of the Department of Homeland Security John Kelly, retired generals and other ex-military types now abound in his administration. Defense analyst and former White House budget official Gordon Adams [summed up](#) the risks of this approach recently in this way:

“Putting military officers in charge of the entire architecture of national security reinforces the trend toward militarizing policy and risks cementing in place ‘the military-industrial complex’ that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of. To borrow the psychologist Abraham H. Maslow’s words, if all the men around President Trump are hammers, the temptation will be ‘to treat everything as if it were a nail.’”

### How the Military Came to Dominate Foreign Policy

President Trump won’t, of course, be starting from scratch in his urge to further elevate the military in foreign and domestic affairs. He’s building on a process that’s already well under way. In the Obama years, for instance, there were a record number of drone strikes, especially outside official U.S. war zones -- [10 times](#) the number launched by the Bush administration. Similarly, the Obama administration paved the way for various Trumpian urges by waging wars on multiple fronts and instituting a [historic](#) [crackdown](#) on whistleblowers in the military and the intelligence communities. It also approved record levels of U.S. arms sales abroad, [\\$278 billion](#) worth of them, or more than double those of the Bush years. (In Trumpian terms: jobs!)



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In addition, as part of his pledge to avoid large, “boots-on-the-ground” conflicts like the Bush administration’s 2003 invasion of Iraq, President Obama oversaw a [sharp increase](#) in the size of the U.S. Special Operations forces, sending them abroad to arm, train, and fight alongside militaries in [138 countries](#)

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in 2016. Think of this approach -- having a “lighter footprint” while expanding the number of conflicts the United States is involved in -- as a case of what I’ve called “[politically sustainable warfare](#).” It seems cheaper, is far less visible, and involves fewer U.S. casualties than full-scale invasions and occupations.

In these years, the Pentagon has also continued to encroach on turf previously occupied by the State Department and the Agency for International Development, including funding its own arms and training programs and engaging in [economic development](#) projects. Under the euphemistic term “building partner capacity,” the Pentagon now has the authority to [arm and train](#) foreign military forces through no less than 70 separate programs.

To be fair, the drift toward military dominance of foreign policy began well before Barack Obama took office. In her 2003 book [The Mission](#), Dana Priest of the *Washington Post* described the increasing role of regional combatant commanders in shaping policymaking in Washington. They could leverage their greater resources and close connections to foreign leaders to outstrip U.S. ambassadors in power and influence. And their growing role was just a symptom of a larger problem that Priest described at the time and that has only become more obvious in the years since: the urge of American leaders to turn to the military for solutions to problems “that are often, at their root, political and economic.” As retired General Anthony Zinni, former head of the U.S. Central Command, [noted](#) for instance, “There is no military solution to terrorism.” That’s a conclusion shared by other American military leaders, but one that has had little effect on U.S. efforts to use force as the primary tool for combatting terrorism in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen, a process that has only [led to](#) more failed and failing states and the further spread of terror groups.

Donald Trump may indeed gut the diplomatic corps, but don’t forget that State Department funding was long ago overwhelmed by the largesse available to what the new president regularly refers to as our “[depleted](#)” military. The Pentagon’s [budget](#) is today [more than 12 times](#) as large as the State Department’s, a disparity sure to grow in the years to come. As former Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted some years ago, there are [more military personnel](#) stationed on one aircraft carrier task force than trained diplomats in the U.S. Foreign Service. And keep in mind that the United States currently has [10 active aircraft carriers](#)

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, which themselves will be just a small part of the Trump administration's proposed [350-ship Navy](#)

Even the intelligence community is likely to be further militarized in the Trump years. While he was head of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Advisor Michael Flynn [tried](#)

to increase its influence at the expense of the CIA. Expect him to attempt to seize control of the nation's intelligence apparatus and put it in service to his own distorted view of the world. From failing to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union to allowing itself to be used to put forward

[misleading information](#)

about Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. Intelligence Community has hardly covered itself in glory. Still, it does contain a cadre of professional analysts who can provide sitting presidents with actual information contradicting prevailing prejudices. This was even true in the case of Iraq, where a number of analysts

[dissented](#)

from the claim that Iraq had nuclear weapons, while others only acquiesced after being

[browbeaten](#)

by Vice President Dick Cheney and the band of neoconservatives in his office.

In the years to come, expect the Cheney model of intelligence manufacturing to be replicated, especially by Flynn, whose extreme views include a belief that Islam is not a real religion, that Iran is the "[linchpin](#)" of a global anti-American coalition of enemies extending from Cuba and Venezuela to North Korea, China, and Russia, and that Islamic "Sharia law" is actually being imposed in parts of [our country](#). Flynn's views on Islam would have been beyond the pale for a top adviser in any prior administration. Now, however, he's positioned to regularly press his views on Donald Trump, who doesn't read and seems inclined to believe the last person he talks to.

### A Military-First Administration

To imagine how Flynn might wield his new power, consider his attempt, while still at the DIA, to get subordinates to prove that Iran was the "[hidden hand](#)" behind the 2012 attacks on the U.S. compound in Benghazi, Libya, that resulted in the death of Ambassador J. Christopher

Stephens. As the

*New York Times* [r](#)

[eported](#)

, "Like many other investigations into Benghazi, theirs found no evidence of any links, and the

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general's stubborn insistence reminded some officials at the agency of how the Bush administration had once relentlessly sought to connect Saddam Hussein and Iraq to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks."

Trump and his men now seem poised to purge the CIA and other intelligence agencies of analysts who might have opinions contrary to their own fantasy view of the world. Expect Flynn, in particular, to try to shape the intelligence community's products towards his ends while serving as interpreter of last resort for the president. Getting Trump to swallow intelligence assessments skewed toward his particular set of prejudices and inclinations should be an easy feat, given that he [can't even acknowledge](#) the size of the crowd at his own inauguration or let go of the demonstrably [false claim](#) that millions of undocumented immigrants voted illegally in the 2016 election.

The only likely obstacle to Flynn's ambitions to impose his twisted view of the world on Trump is the other "big league" Islamophobe in the administration, White House counselor Steve Bannon. As a recent *New York Times* account [noted](#), Bannon has already attempted to outmaneuver Flynn in the battle for access to the president on foreign policy issues and his elevation to the National Security Council at the expense of the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of national intelligence is just the latest indication of how influential he's likely to be in shaping Trump's foreign policy agenda. This is hardly good news, as on certain issues he may be even more extreme than Flynn, if that's possible.

Trump's predictably militarized approach to policymaking could have serious impacts on the domestic front as well. On his fifth day in office, for example, he threatened by tweet to "[send in the Feds](#)" to Chicago if the city government didn't take steps to "end the carnage" there. It was unclear whether he meant federal law enforcement personnel or federal troops, a vagueness troubling in its own right. And don't forget that his pledge to "build a wall" ensures a significant jump in funding for the further militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, already being patrolled by unarmed drones and growing numbers of armed federal agents. After all, it took him just days after his inauguration to announce a [plan](#) to add 5,000 personnel to the Border Patrol and 10,000 agents to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency.

As in all matters Trumpian, some will say we shouldn't take him at his word, or that we should wait for his first budget proposal and other such documents to see what he's *really* going to do. But the evidence is already abundant that the Trump administration is on a path toward

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undermining our democracy by pouring taxpayer dollars galore into the U.S. military. This will happen despite the fact that, 15 years after 9/11, that military has won nothing and settled no conflicts to Washington's advantage, even as terror groups have spread across the Greater Middle East and Africa. It's a decade-and-a-half-long record that should lead to almost any other set of plans than the ones the Trump administration clearly has in mind. But don't tell them. They could care less.

Frightening as it may be, it's important to recognize that Trump's impulse to further militarize American society is by no means a done deal. Democrats in the Senate are in a position to [stop](#) [it](#) by voting as a bloc against any proposal to dramatically ratchet up spending on the Pentagon, which would deprive Republicans of the 60 votes they need to move forward on a spending proposal. In addition, the new president's plans to pump up the Pentagon, dramatically slash taxes, invest in expensive new programs like the border wall, and create a trillion dollar [infrastructure plan](#) could set the stage for [massive deficits](#) that will undoubtedly unnerve constituencies ranging from fiscal conservatives to important sectors of the business community.

And keep in mind that significant numbers of military and intelligence professionals truly believe in civilian control of the military and don't want to take on tasks unrelated to traditional military missions. In addition, Trump has already pledged to target [overpriced weapons systems](#) like the F-35 and force the Pentagon to get its books in order so it can at last [pass an audit](#)

. Whether or not he follows through on these promises, he will have put them on the public agenda, reinforcing one reality: the way [so much of the money](#) currently going to the Pentagon has more to do with lining the pockets of contractors than with defending the United States and its allies.

The military-first direction in which Trump is going to take his administration will predictably lead to yet more militarized policies in the world. It's that hammer and nail again. He should take a lesson from history by listening to the speeches of the former Supreme Allied Commander in World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a military man who also rose to the pinnacle of power in Washington. As president, Eisenhower not only spoke out against the dangers of [the military-industrial complex](#) but also stressed that America's power is ultimately rooted in the strength of its economy and the health of its citizens, not in seeking

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[magical military solutions](#)

or in overspending on the Pentagon. Unfortunately, Donald Trump is no Dwight D. Eisenhower.

*William D. Hartung, a [TomDispatch &nbsp;regular](#), is the director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy. He is the author of [Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex](#)*

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