10.5: Militarism and the Military

Learning Objectives

- Examine the extent of militarism in the United States.
- Discuss the controversy over the size of the military budget.

In democracies the political and economic institutions intersect at the military. The military is both part of the government and run and funded by the government. As C. Wright Mills recognized when he spoke of the power elite (discussed earlier in the chapter), the military in the United States involves not just the armed forces but also some of the biggest corporations that receive billions of dollars in military contracts, as well as the government leaders who approve large military budgets to fund these contracts.

The military has played a key role in some of the most significant events of the last 100 years and beyond. One of these, of course, was World War II. This war was what we now call the good war, a war fought to save the world for democracy. Millions died on the battlefield, in cities bombed by planes, and in concentration camps, and in the end Hitler and his allies were defeated. About 20 years after World War II ended, the United States began fighting another war meant to save the world for democracy, but this war was very different from the one against Hitler. This war was fought in Vietnam, and however a noble effort World War II might have been, the Vietnam War was just as ignoble to its critics. It was a war, some said, not to save the world for democracy but to help extend America’s power where it did not belong. If the World War II generation grew up with a patriotic love for their nation, the Vietnam War generation grew up with much more cynicism about their government. Some members of this generation read Mills’s critique of the power elite and agreed with his concern about America’s military might.

Ironically Mills’s concern about the military was shared by none other than President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who warned about the dangers of what he called the *military-industrial complex* in his farewell presidential address. Eisenhower himself had been a member of the military-industrial complex, having served as a five-star general and supreme
commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II and head of Columbia University before becoming president. His military experience made him no fan of warfare, as he once observed, “I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.” He also feared that the military-industrial complex was becoming too powerful and gaining “unwarranted influence” over American life as it acted for its own interests and not necessarily for those of the nation as a whole. He warned that the “potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist” (Eisenhower, 1960, p. A1). Eisenhower, D. D. (1960). Public papers of the presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Eisenhower’s fears about the military-industrial complex reflected his more general concern about militarism, or an overemphasis on military policy and spending, which he thought was costing the nation far too much money. In a remarkable and now famous statement made early in his presidency in April 1953, Eisenhower (1960) declared,

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron.

A half century after Eisenhower made this statement, U.S. military spending continues unabated. In 2010 it was $844 billion (including $95 billion for veterans’ benefits) and accounted for almost 20% of all federal spending (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). Statistical abstract of the United States: 2011. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab but a much higher percentage of federal spending over which the government has any control. The federal budget includes both mandatory and discretionary spending. As the name implies, mandatory spending is required by various laws and includes such things as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, food stamps, and interest payments on the national debt; much of these mandatory expenses are funded by trust funds, such as Social Security taxes, which are raised and spent separately from income taxes. Discretionary spending involves the money the president and Congress must decide how to spend each year and includes income tax dollars only. Military spending accounts for about 43% of discretionary spending (Friends Committee on National Legislation, 2009). Friends Committee on National Legislation. (2009). How much of your 2008 income taxes pay for war? Washington, DC: Friends Committee on National Legislation. Retrieved from http://www.fcnl.org/issues/item.php?...53&issue_id=19

Figure 10.18
Critics say that U.S. military spending is too high and takes needed dollars from domestic needs like schooling and health care.

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The U.S. military budget is by far the highest in the world and dwarfs the military budgets for the nations ranking after the United States. In 2008, the latest year for which international data were available, the U.S. military budget was $607 billion; the nations ranking after the United States were China, $85 billion; France, $66 billion; United Kingdom, $65 billion; Russia, $59 billion; Germany, $47 billion; and Japan, $46 billion. U.S. military spending accounted for almost 42% of the world’s military spending in 2008 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2009).

Another dimension of militarism involves arms exports by both the U.S. government and U.S. military contractors. Combining data on both types of exports, the United States sent $12.2 billion in arms deliveries to other nations in 2008. This figure ranked the highest in the world and constituted about 38% of all world arms exports. Russia ranked second with $5.4 billion in arms deliveries, while Germany ranked third with $2.9 billion (Grimmett, 2009).

Most arms exports from the United States and other exporters go to developing nations, and critics say that the exports help fuel the worldwide arms race and international discord and that they often go to nations ruled by dictators, who then use them to threaten their own people (Morgan, 2008; Stohl, Schroeder, & Smith, 2007).

Cost equivalencies illustrate what is lost when so much money is spent on the military. An F-22 fighter aircraft, conceived and built to win fights with aircraft that the Soviet Union (and later, Russia) never built, costs about $350 million each (R. J. Smith, 2009). Smith, R. J. (2009, July 10). Premier U.S. fighter jet has major shortcomings. The Washington Post, p. A1. This same sum could be used to pay the salaries of about 11,700 new teachers earning $30,000 per year or to build 23 elementary schools at a cost of $15 million each. A nuclear submarine can cost at least $2.5 billion. This sum could provide 500,000 scholarships worth $5,000 each to low- and middle-income high school students to help them pay for college.

A key question, of course, is whether U.S. military spending is higher than it needs to be. Experts disagree over this issue. Some think the United States needs to maintain and even increase its level of military spending, even with the Cold War long gone, to replace aging weapons systems, to meet the threat posed by terrorists and by “rogue” nations such as Iran, and to respond to various other trouble spots around the world. Military spending is good for workers, they add, because it creates jobs, and it also contributes to technological development (Ruttan, 2006).


Other experts think the military budget is much higher than it needs to be to defend the United States and to address its legitimate interests around the world. They say the military budget is bloated because the defense industry lobbies so successfully and because military spending provides jobs and income to the home districts of members of Congress. For these reasons, they say, military spending far exceeds the amount that needs to be spent to provide an adequate defense for the United States and its allies. They also argue that military spending actually produces fewer jobs than spending in other sectors. According to a recent estimate, $1 billion spent by the Pentagon creates 11,600 jobs, but the same $1 billion spent in other sectors would create 17,100 clean energy jobs, 19,600 health-care jobs, and 29,100 education jobs (Pollin & Garrett-Peltier, 2009).


Militarism in the American Culture

The discussion to this point has highlighted military spending, but many observers also criticize the extent of militarism in the U.S. culture. According to this critique, many aspects of the American popular culture are violent and militaristic. Innumerable video games on PlayStation, Wii, and other platforms involve military operations, including the dropping of bombs, shooting with automatic weapons, and hand-to-hand combat; these games are criticized as constituting a key part of the “military entertainment complex” (Leonard, 2004).


Professional wrestling does not involve weapons, but its (fake) violence attracts legions of fans across the nation. Critics say that all of these aspects of the popular culture contribute to a willingness to use violent means to solve interpersonal disputes and to support for militarism in U.S. foreign policy. They also say that the militaristic video games are training youths for life in the military later. As the call for an October 2009 protest vigil at the site of a military contractor starkly claimed, “Our children are being trained through video games today to be the remote killers of tomorrow” (http://news.haverford.edu/blogs/cpgc).

Perhaps more seriously, hundreds of militia, survivalist, and patriot groups populate the country and have been increasing in numbers in recent years thanks to the failing economy and concern over immigration (Guarino,
Although the military-industrial complex may be cause for concern, the existence of so many of these groups shows that militarism has also penetrated American life in a rather frightening way.

As this overview of the debate over military spending and militarism in American life indicates, the military remains a hot topic more than two decades after the Cold War ended with the demise of the Soviet Union. As we move further into the 21st century, the twin issues of military spending and militarism will represent a major challenge for the U.S. political and economic institutions to address in a way that meets America's international and domestic interests.

Conclusion

- U.S. military spending amounted to almost $770 billion in 2009, reflecting the highest military budget in the world.
- Critics of the military budget say that the billions of dollars spent on weapons and other military needs would be better spent on domestic needs such as schools and day care.

For Your Review

1. Do you think the U.S. military budget should be increased, be reduced, or stay about the same? Explain your answer.

Addressing Political and Economic Issues: What Sociology Suggests

Sociological theory and research are once again relevant for addressing certain issues raised by studies of the polity and economy. We discuss this relevance briefly for each social institution.

Political Issues

Sociological work on the political institution highlights at least two related issues. The first is the possible monopolization and misuse of power by a relatively small elite composed of the powerful or the haves, as they are often called. If elite theories are correct, this small elite takes advantage of its place at the top of American society and its concomitant wealth, power, and influence to benefit its own interests. Sociological work that supports the assumptions of elite theories does not necessarily imply any specific measures to reduce the elite’s influence, but it does suggest the need for consumer groups and other public-interest organizations to remain vigilant about elite misuse of power and to undertake efforts to minimize this misuse.

The second issue is the lack of political participation from the segments of American society that traditionally have very little power: the poor, the uneducated, and people of color. Because voting and other forms of political participation are much more common among the more educated and wealthy segments of society, the relative lack of participation by those without power helps to ensure that they remain without power. Sociological research on political participation thus suggests the need to promote voting and other political participation by the poor and uneducated if American democratic and egalitarian ideals are to be achieved.
Economic Issues

Sociological work on the economy also highlights at least two related issues. The first is continuing evidence of racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring and employment. This evidence certainly suggests the need for stronger enforcement of existing laws against racial and ethnic discrimination in employment and for public education campaigns to alert workers to signs of this type of discrimination.

The second issue concerns the satisfaction that American workers find in their jobs. Although the level of this satisfaction is fairly high, sociological research highlights the importance of coworker friendships for both job satisfaction and more general individual well-being. These research findings indicate that employers and employees alike should make special efforts to promote coworker friendships. Because work is such an important part of most people’s lives, these efforts should prove beneficial for many reasons.