



*No Guts No Glory, Dwayne Booth (AKA Mr. Fish)*

## Cross of Iron

*This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.*

Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953

**A**S HIS SECOND TERM IN OFFICE came to a close in 1796, George Washington dedicated a significant part of his Farewell Address to discussing foreign relations, in particular warning against engaging in permanent alliances with other nations, which he feared would involve the nation in dangerous “foreign entanglements.”

Over a century and a half later, Dwight D. Eisenhower echoed Washington’s sentiments in his own Farewell Address. Coining the term ‘military-industrial complex,’ he warned that the formidable union of defense contractors and the armed forces that had built up during the Cold War now posed a dire threat to democracy itself.

Despite being the former commander of the costliest military campaign in history, Eisenhower resisted pressure to increase the military budget during the expanding Cold War arms race, slashing defense spending by 27% during his eight-year term in office. (Ironically, it was Eisenhower’s standing as a war hero which gave him the credibility to restrain the military budget, an expense which he described as “a necessary evil.”)

Although Eisenhower attempted with some success to hold the line on defense spending, his administration still maintained an annual military budget fully three to four times larger than its size during the brief postwar military demobilization.

‘Ike’s’ doctrine of massive nuclear retaliation and a huge expansion of the CIA’s covert operations overseas also required significant budgetary increases.

Ike's 'surprise attack' on the military-industrial lobby was unexpected, but his warning had only a modest effect on Congress or the public at the time.

And despite John F. Kennedy's similarly famous speech to the United Nations in September 1961—in which he portrayed the accelerating nuclear arms race as a "Sword of Damocles hanging over every man, woman and child"—the military budget ballooned under his administration, as well as that of his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson.

By the time 'LBJ' left office in 1968, the defense budget far exceeded Eisenhower's \$370 billion peacetime minimum, matching the \$515 billion war budget that Truman had left on Eisenhower's doorstep in 1953.

Most of this increase was required to fight the Vietnam War, and when the country finally withdrew in disgrace from that debacle, President Nixon was able to cut the military budget by a whopping 29%.

President Reagan attempted to outspend Russia's strained ability to maintain the sprawling Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact alliances—budgeting huge sums for his 'Star Wars' initiative and other expensive new programs—but the defense budget fell for eleven straight years as the Cold War wound down in late 1980s and 1990s under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton.

But just when discussion about a potential 'peace dividend' made possible by the collapse of the U.S.S.R. began to gain traction in Congress, the attacks of 9/11 shifted the focus to a costly and ultimately unwinnable 'War on Terror,' giving the Pentagon and the weapons industry a virtual blank check to increase spending.

By the time George W. Bush left office in 2008, the military budget had reached a then all-time high of nearly \$600 billion.

Although President Obama had pledged in his campaign to reign in the military budget, he continued the trend, and his successor, Donald Trump, signed a whopping \$738 billion defense bill for 2020.

Trump's budget included, as usual, big ticket items for all three major services, including new long-range bombers for the Air Force, the largest shipbuilding program in two decades for the Navy, and expensive new tanks and combat vehicles for the Army.

The largesse continued under President Biden, whose military budget for 2023 set another new record of \$847 billion, including \$45 billion tacked on by Congress to aid in the stagnating war in Ukraine.

Total U.S. defense spending has now reached levels not seen since World War II—when the country had 16 million servicemen waging wars on three continents—and the nation is now responsible for almost half of all world military spending, including \$100-250 billion to maintain an empire of well over 800 military bases overseas.

The military-industrial complex has now far exceeded what Eisenhower could ever have imagined—a vast network of entrenched political and corporate power fueling a permanent war economy. In essence, the business of America, and the bedrock of its economy, is war.

Eisenhower gave another fateful address in 1953, known as the 'Cross of Iron' speech. In it, he portrayed the true cost of building weapons as a lost opportunity to build more schools, hospitals and homes, leaving "humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

Realistically, America has few enemies abroad, and its most dangerous enemy is now within: As many historians have noted, the most common cause of the collapse of nations is unchecked militarism. ■