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The Industrial-Military Complex

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Editor's Note: The following views are those of the author and are presented here to give readers a variety of viewpoints. The Tribune's opinions are expressed only in editorials.

WASHINGTON

Democratic thinkers are all vaguely aware of something they call the military - industrial complex, or, sometimes, the military - industrial - academic - scientific complex. This is held to be a bad thing, subversive of democratic procedures and even of democratic ends, and probably Republican in origin and orientation, since it is certainly big business.

Yet it was a Republican observer of the political scene — President Eisenhower — who first called the complex to American attention as a danger. And it was under two Democratic administrations — Kennedy and Johnson — that the complex has grown to what now amounts to unaccountable power.

The unaccountability of the power came to light last week in an effort by a Senate subcommittee to get the government agency in charge of accounting to account for profits in the defense industry, or

war industry, as we used to call it in a more honest age.

The chairman of the subcommittee on government economy, Sen. William Proxmire of Wisconsin, urged his witness, Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats, to study war profits. The country's head accountant pleaded that the proper study of the government's accounting agency is something else — anything else — than where the government's money is going.

Staats, backed by his assistant, Frank H. Weitzel, told Proxmire that the General Accounting Office was just the wrong outfit to ask the interesting questions the senator was proposing.

The problem is, in Staats' view, that defense contractors would be reluctant to supply the agency with the confidential information required to answer the questions. Yes, agreed Weitzel on cue, there is "reluctance on the part of some contractors to give information to the government."

Abruptly, one is carried back to a different war and to the raw recruit ordered to take a German machinegun. His reply: "I can't take that machinegun, cap'n. He's using it." This is roughly the Staats-Weitzel position and it is the best defense the defense contractors could have. They cannot be investigated because they are "reluctant" to give the government information necessary to such an investigation.

How come that principle never applies to ordinary taxpayers accused of holding out seven and a half dollars of income, but only to billionaire war contractors?

It is inconceivable, for instance, that Staats, if asked to investigate a government typ-

ist suspected of stealing paper clips, would turn the job down because of her predictable "reluctance" to discuss paper clips.

One way to deal with reluctant informants among defense contractors would be to take away their contracts unless the desired information is forthcoming. This, however, seems to have occurred neither to the Accounting Office, to the Pentagon, nor to anyone else.

Meanwhile, the reluctant watchdog of the government dollar testified that another watchdog, the competitive system, was just about as useless as the Accounting Office as a way of keeping the game honest. Military contracts awarded through advertised, competitive bidding dropped to 11.5 per cent of the total this year, said Staats.

It is satisfyingly grand to talk of the industrial - military complex, as if it were something like the Zeitgeist of the last century or the Dancing Sickness of the 15th. Actually, what it is is a lot of people making money out of war-like activities. The solution to the complex is to take the money out of the activities.

The reason Pentagon people don't bother to cross T's and dot I's when dealing with defense contractors is that they expect to go to work for them on retirement, give or take a certain amount of camouflage and persiflage to placate the law. That's one place right there to start making the complex concave.

The other, of course, is to draft industry for war just as we draft men. Are corporations and profits really more sacred to us than human beings?

Don't ask.

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