Book Review

The Trillion Dollar War Machine: How Runaway Military Spending Drives America into Foreign Wars and Bankrupts us At Home, by William D. Hartung and Ben Freeman. (New York: Bold Type Books, 2025.)

Reviewed by Brian D'Agostino

This book outlines and details the deeply entrenched set of economic and political structures that constitute the current U.S. military-industrial complex. It is an antidote to the common misconception of many psychohistorians and clinicians that the war system is driven by mass psychology. Lloyd deMause held this view, for example, as does Vamik Volkan, Ludwig Janus, and many others. In reality, public opinion and voting data show that only a minority of the mass public, perhaps a third, are militarists by disposition. This characterizes the minority of Germans who voted for the Nazis in that country's 1932 election. Even Donald Trump's MAGA base is not consistently militarist; it encompasses isolationists as well as warmongers. (Also, intelligence assessments provided by Tulsi Gabbard cautioned the administration against attacking Iran in 2026, advice that Trump ignored.)

The Trillion Dollar War Machine explores the structural factors that explain how sociopathic leaders and their enablers can take a country to war without majority support. For example, in the case of Nazi Germany (a topic beyond the scope of the book), big landowners, industrialists, and top military brass supported Hitler, negating the will of the majority, who voted for socialist, communist, or Catholic parties that were actually anti-fascist and not militarist. Similarly, in the case of the US at present, Trump was elected with the support of weapons manufacturers, oil companies, and rich political donors such as Elon Musk and Miriam Adelson. It doesn't matter that a majority of voters are not militarists, including many in the MAGA "base" who were misled by Trump's false campaign promise that he would not get the country into unnecessary wars.

Hartung's and Freeman's book shows how Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and other weapons manufacturers shape American culture, politics, and policy. Along with foreign governments such as the United Arab Emirates and rich donors, the big military contractors fund think tanks that agitated for a U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran, for example. These think tanks include The Atlantic Council, Center for a New American Security, The Aspen Institute, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

The book examines in detail how the military-industrial complex sells war. For one thing, "defense" contractors employ hundreds of lobbyists, more than one for every member of Congress. War profiteers drive the militarization of US science, industry, and high-tech. They infiltrate Hollywood, the gaming industry, academia, and other cultural institutions. All this occurs independently of public opinion. As indicated above, a substantial minority of the mass public does support war and militarism, but that cannot explain why the war lobby prevails in the halls of power or how militarists can win majority elections.

The Trillion Dollar War Machine strikes a blow for truth and demilitarization. One expert cited in the book said that US military equipment is three or four times more expensive than Russian and Chinese weapon systems and not as good. The authors expose the banal and corrupt reality behind the militarists' glossy propaganda. For example, many weapons systems advertised as miracles of technological prowess are in reality shoddy, poorly designed and unreliable. Notoriously, the Littoral Combat Ship, a joint project of Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics, has a disastrous performance record. The F-35 fighter jet has been plagued with schedule delays, cost overruns, and hundreds of unresolved defects. To take another case, the Bell-Boeing V-22 Osprey crashed 10 times between 2007 and 2023, killing 64 people.

Nor does America's bloated and costly war machine have much to do with its stated purpose—defense of the population—which would be better served by demilitarization, collective security, and authentically protective military deployments, notably the policy known as "non-offensive defense." Permanent war economies and national security states are modern incarnations of centuries'-old, institutionalized predation and violence. Nevertheless, like slavery and serfdom, the war system can be abolished; it persists until it doesn't.

Meanwhile, militarist propaganda deforms the policy preferences of normally peace-loving citizens and makes the warmongers even more hawkish. On this problem, it is worth recalling the words of John Milton, quoted

in Herman's and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*: "They who have put out the people's eyes, reproach them of their blindness." Hartung's and Freeman's book exposes the lies, grift and sheer incompetence at the core of the US war system, a parasitic, zombie institution legitimized by ideologies of self-defense and heroism. By opening the people's eyes, the authors bring a demilitarized future one step closer.*

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* An interview with Bill Hartung about *The Trillion Dollar War Machine* appears in *Disarmament Times*, May 2026 https://ngodisarm.org/