

Russell Islam

Mira Loma High School, Sacramento

“Other than screaming, I am not sure what I will do in the next few months without gainful employment,” says Christina, a forty-five year old woman. She has been unemployed for fifteen months, all the while struggling to support her mother, who has cancer. On March 17, 2010, her story was presented before Congress. On that same day, the Department of Defense awarded weapons manufacturer BAE Systems, Inc., with \$74,090,258 to develop gun turrets for use in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each day, countless unemployed Americans such as Christina face daily battles simply to survive, while the federal government expends billions of dollars on defense. In the aftermath of a global recession, America should fully comprehend the true cost of its massive defense budget before it becomes too late.

In his farewell address delivered fifty years ago, President Dwight Eisenhower warned Americans of the rise of what he deemed the “military-industrial complex”. After the Second World War, the military and the armaments industry had grown to colossal proportions that alarmed Eisenhower. Indubitably, America’s soldiers, who fought valiantly against totalitarian regimes in Europe and the Pacific, were supported by arms corporations; however, the peacetime role of the military-industrial complex was unclear. Should our leaders continue to spend heavily on national defense? If yes, will they be able to control the power of the complex? President Eisenhower posed these imperative questions to the populace. Half a century later, we find ourselves continuing along a road to nowhere: for the 2011 fiscal year, the Obama administration has requested a defense budget totaling \$708 billion. Let us consider this sum of money in perspective. It is equivalent to twelve times the net worth of Bill Gates, 2.6 million times the price of an average American home, and 5.8 million times the average annual salary of an American physician. If \$700 billion were distributed equally among America’s three hundred million men, women, and children, each person would receive over two thousand dollars. Rather than utilizing these funds to assist downtrodden Americans like Christina, the U.S. federal government sustains two wars and numerous military installations throughout the globe. We must spend what is necessary to defend ourselves, but simultaneously we must fight wars at home: wars against poverty, wars against suffering, and wars against hopelessness. Evidently, America must critically examine its defense policies and pursue a course to a more sustainable future.

Undoubtedly, the twenty-first century presents grave security threats, from terrorism to nuclear proliferation. While the maintenance of national defense is vital, our most pernicious problems lie within America’s borders. Our issues at home deserve the same amount of attention as do our issues abroad. Faced with a 9.5% unemployment rate, our leaders must display the audacity to feed the hungry and clothe the cold. Our obsession with defense must give way to a balanced approach to government before adverse consequences ensue. Perhaps Eisenhower himself said it best: “How far can you go without destroying from within what you are trying to defend from without?”