The American Warfare State: The Domestic Politics of Military Spending
Rebecca U. Thorpe
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In *The American Warfare State*, Rebecca Thorpe attempts to answer what she calls "the fundamental puzzle" of American politics: "Why a nation founded on a severe distrust of standing armies and centralized power developed and maintained the most powerful military in history."

The answer isn't as obvious as it might seem. Thorpe, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Washington, traces the creation of a permanent war economy back to World War II, when war production expanded into new locales, especially the suburbs of major cities and the agricultural or underdeveloped areas of the South and West. "Widespread economic dependence on war investments," Thorpe writes, "became an unintended consequence of a national mobilization strategy where multiple actors pursued their own independent goals."

The legacy of that inadvertent geographic shift is a number of predominantly rural and sparsely populated areas that have grown disproportionately dependent on military expenditures. A subset of members of Congress representing these areas are, all other factors being equal, more likely than their fellows to support weapons expenditures, even if those weapons are not necessary to U.S. national security. Those same members are also more likely than other members of their own party to support the wars in which these weapons are used, an effect most apparent among Democrats.

Thorpe's study deepens our understanding of what we already knew. She suggests that the post–World War II political economy of defense operates in a particular way. First, economic reliance is the sustaining factor, not total defense dollars spent; and second, analyses that omit subcontracts, and instead solely focus on prime contracts, fail to gauge the true impact of defense spending, especially to local economies.

Thorpe developed a proprietary database of defense contracts to measure "the concentration of the local defense economy relative to other industries." Critically, her database includes not just prime contracts but also the myriad defense subcontracts that are

geographically more widely distributed. The data is limited, however, and Thorpe admits that the findings that flow from it are preliminary.

More generally, and to her credit, Thorpe does not exaggerate what questions her models (or anyone else's) are capable of answering. Empirical studies can only demonstrate that members from "economically reliant districts are more likely to vote for large defense budgets" but cannot prove why they do so. The reason seems obvious enough—the economic benefits flow to their constituents and ultimately to the politicians—but must ultimately be inferred.

According to Thorpe, however, the political economy of military spending is only half of the answer to America's paradoxical military might. How the military capabilities are used is the other, and Thorpe explores this as well.

Drawing on the established literature surrounding the Founders and the Constitution, Thorpe documents how "the balance of war power has shifted decisively in favor of the executive branch." This phenomenon has been well documented, but, according to Thorpe, "existing accounts do not fully appreciate why the Constitution's structural safeguards failed to prevent the consolidation of power or minimize war."

In principle, Congress has a constitutional obligation to limit the executive's ability to wage war, but in practice it has not and will not. Even if members of Congress were truly committed to cutting off funding for a particular war, they will not defund the military as a whole. As long as military assets are funded and at their disposal, presidents can effectively "force legislators to take the positive action of passing legislation in order to provide an effective check."

This turns the Madisonian model on its head by downgrading "the standard for legislative approval of wars from a matter of absolute necessity to one of mere expediency."

For much of the first 150 years of the nation's history, Congress approved the necessary funds to fight and win wars but withdrew funding after the wars ended. This meant that for the most part—the Navy being an exception—the nation did not possess a standing military, thus denying the president the one tool that he was almost certain to use. If he wished to go to war, he was compelled to come to Congress not merely for the legal authority to launch the war but also for the funds (and forces) necessary to conduct it.

Since the end of World War II, however, the funding constraint has proved all but nonexistent. Congress simply doesn't wield it, even against weak presidents, and not even to limit—let alone to terminate—unpopular wars.

The political economy of defense spending merely compounds this problem. Cutting defense spending is politically difficult, especially "for legislators representing areas that rely on a war economy for job security and growth." In this way, Thorpe notes, "Local economic imperatives not only influence legislators' political priorities, but also reinforce some members' ideological commitments to American military supremacy and interventionism."

Take the case of Vietnam. Thorpe explains that "many members proposed measures to cut off appropriations for military operations in Southeast Asia, but these initiatives were ultimately rejected or so weakened by amendments that they were almost entirely symbolic. Instead of eliminating military spending, Congress continued to pass legislation instructing the president to end the war while appropriating funds to carry it out."

Subsequent case studies reveal a consistent pattern of congressional impotence. From Lebanon and Grenada in 1983, to Panama and Somalia under George H. W. Bush, to Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, launched during the Clinton era, members of Congress occasionally griped about military operations they didn't support—and, in most instances, had never actually authorized. But they never succeeded in imposing meaningful constraints on the conduct of those wars.

In short, the checks and balances of the Constitution have failed. "The constitutional framers' reliance on institutional mechanisms and competing interests as a means to disperse power and limit war ultimately fell short of their professed aims." Thorpe concludes, "Institutional checks and competing interests do not reliably limit power or promote the public good."

Although Thorpe explains why this has happened, she offers no prescription for fixing the problem, perhaps because she doesn't believe that there is a solution. That fatalism might be appropriate given our recent history, and the information presented in this book, but it is discouraging all the same.

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