TAXPAYERS for COMMON SENSE

REPORT

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Political Footprint of the Military Industry



Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine, and Acting Under Secretary of Defense Comptroller Jules W. Hurst III testify together before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Pentagon's FY27 budget request. In April, the Pentagon requested a record $1.5 trillion in funding for Fiscal Year 2027. Department of Defense photo by Digital Media Lead for the Joint Chiefs of Staff Benjamin Applebaum.

In his 1961 farewell address, U.S. President and former five-star general Dwight D. Eisenhower coined the term "military-industrial complex."[1] He warned that the military industry could acquire unwarranted political influence, leading to a "disastrous rise of misplaced power." More than six decades later, Eisenhower's warning is increasingly relevant as the influence of the military industry over our elected officials has grown dramatically.

Some of that growth is measurable. Over the past decade, the military industry has spent over $1.3 billion lobbying lawmakers to influence policies and spending decisions in support of its financial interests.[2] The industry also spends millions of dollars per year on political contributions. The amount spent by the military industry both on lobbying and on political contributions has increased over time, rising at about double the rate of inflation since 1998.[3] The sheer scale of this spending buys immense political influence, creating perverse incentives for policymakers to continuously increase military spending. In large part due to this influence, over the first 25 years of this century, U.S. military spending grew by about 48 percent, adjusted for inflation.[4] Then last year, it grew by 18 percent. This report examines both the military industry's influence and

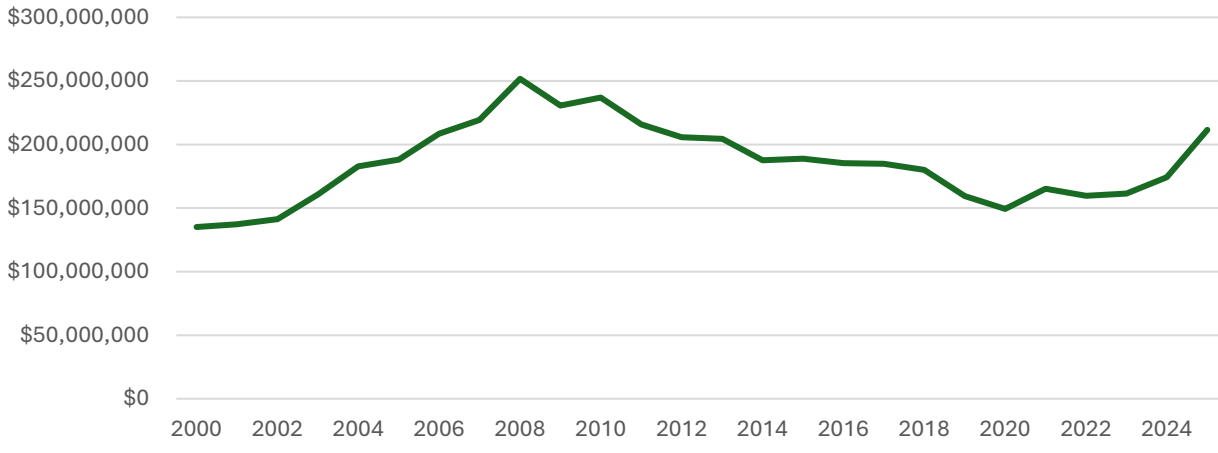
its impact on taxpayers and national security, reviewing trends in lobbying expenditures and campaign contributions, and detailing evidence of industry influence including budget reconciliation spending, backdoor earmarks, industry revenue, and an industry-led project called Project Meridian that will offer recommendations on the future of warfare.

Military Industry Lobbying

According to OpenSecrets.org, a nonprofit organization dedicated to tracking money in politics, the military industry spent over $199 million on lobbying in 2025—equivalent to $545,205 per day. Those millions helped employ 1,193 registered lobbyists. Of that number, 636, roughly 53 percent, were former government insiders.[5] At Lockheed Martin, the largest Pentagon contractor by revenue, 34 of the 52 in-house lobbyists are former government insiders, roughly 65 percent. In 2025, Lockheed's lobbying expenditure reached a 17-year peak.[6]

These former government insiders, called revolving door lobbyists, previously worked for the federal government, gaining experience in congressional offices, the White House, or the Pentagon. That prior experience not only helps them navigate the political landscape—it also allows them to leverage their connections. Moreover, the ability for government workers to leave government and immediately start working for the industry they oversee can create incentives for those workers to favor the industry's policy preferences in hopes of securing high-paying jobs in the industry.

Figure 1. Inflation-Adjusted Military Industry Lobbying Expenditures from 2000-2025



Source: OpenSecrets.org, Bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator

Figure 1 shows a generally upward trajectory in recent years for inflation-adjusted military industry lobbying spending. From 2000 to 2025, the annual inflation-adjusted expenditures increased from $135 million to $211.5 million in October 2026 dollars, an increase of 55.6 percent.[7] While inflation-adjusted lobbying spending

trended downward through the 2010s, it has been trending up through the first half of this decade. Last year, inflation-adjusted military industry lobbying expenditures were the highest they have been in over a decade.

Data suggests military lobbying and influence may reach new heights in 2026. OpenSecrets found that the number of entities lobbying on military issues increased by 10 percent in the first quarter of 2026 versus the first quarter in 2025, and that military lobbying spending grew by about 4 percent.[8] This increase follows last year's record-high lobbying spending on military issues amid new Pentagon spending included in the budget reconciliation package, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA).[9]

One likely cause of the military industry lobbying surge is the Iran War.[10] In the weeks following the onset of the war on February 28, 34 firms hired new lobbyists or amended existing contracts while indicating they will seek to influence defense, energy, or homeland security policy.[11] In March, the Pentagon sent the White House a $200 billion supplemental request. Within weeks of that announcement, every major military contractor had increased its lobbying presence in Washington.[12] Ultimately, in June, the White House sent Congress a significantly lower supplemental request for $67.1 billion.[13]

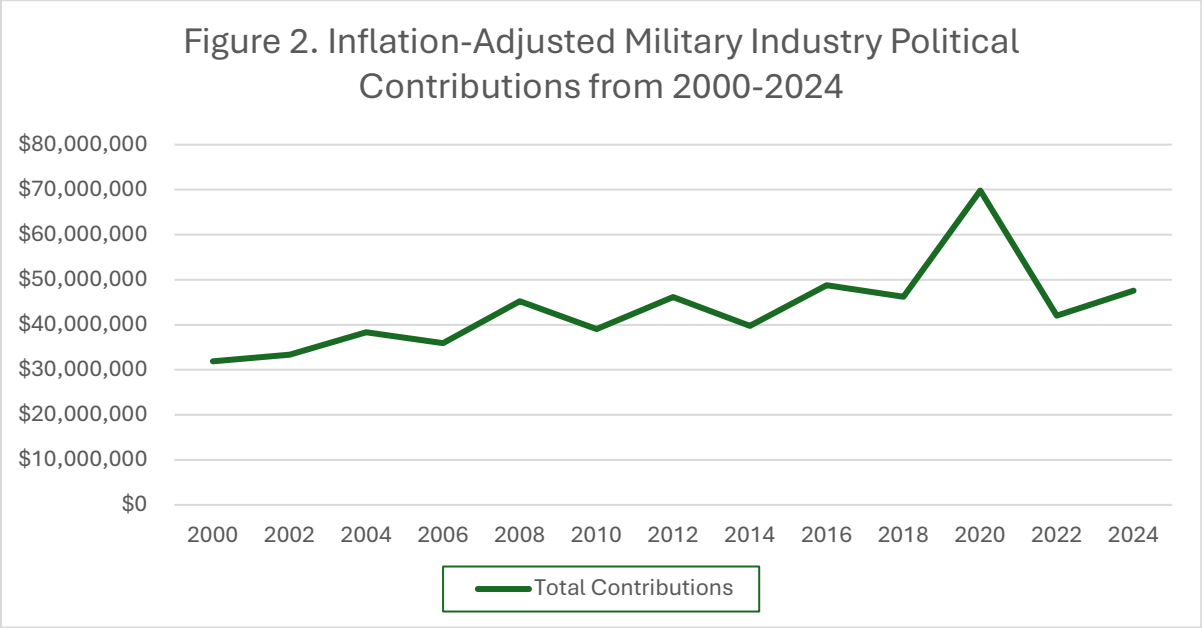
Additionally, the Iran War has depleted American munitions stockpiles, which will take years to restore.[14] This depletion has already led the Pentagon to award billions to major military contractors to ramp up munitions production.[15]

Another likely cause of increased lobbying from the military industry is the Pentagon's announcement in April that it would seek a record budget request of $1.5 trillion for FY2027. That $1.5 trillion includes $1.15 trillion in base discretionary spending, alongside an unprecedented $350 billion request for mandatory spending through reconciliation.

Notably, that $1.5 trillion in Pentagon spending is not aligned with some of the Pentagon's stated goals. For years, the Pentagon has been saying it wants to encourage new entrants in the military contracting space to enhance competition and reduce costs.[16] However, an analysis from the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) found that this year's military spending package would predominantly benefit the largest military contractors, an about-face that may have something to do with the far larger lobbying expenditures of traditional military contractors compared to new entrants.[17]

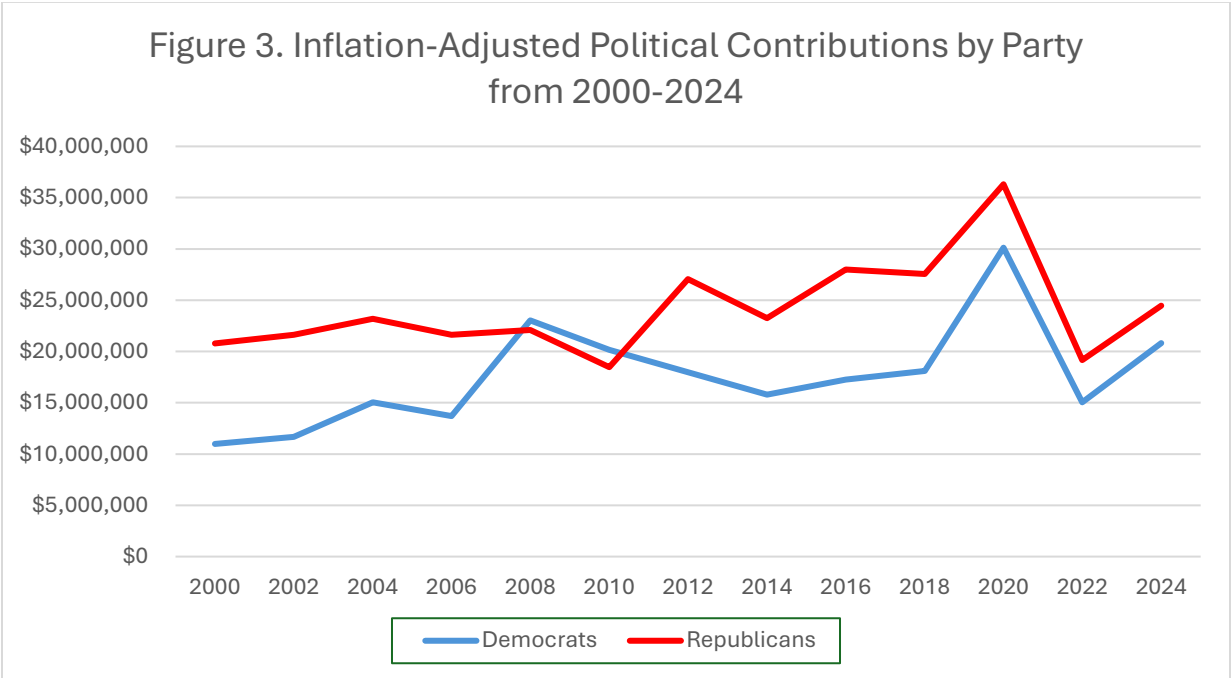
Military Industry Political Contributions

To bolster its lobbying efforts, the military industry also heavily invests in political campaigns and action committees. Across the five campaign cycles from 2016 to 2024, individuals associated with Pentagon contractors and industry groups contributed over $200 million to campaigns and political action committees (PACs).



Source: OpenSecrets.org, Bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator

As the dotted trend line of **Figure 2** illustrates, political contributions from the military industry have generally increased over the past three and a half decades. Contributions are typically higher in presidential election cycles, given that presidential candidates and their campaign committees tend to be the largest recipients of military industry contributions during those cycles.



Source: OpenSecrets.org, Bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator

Figure 3 shows that military industry contributions flow to both major parties. From 2019 to 2024, Republican candidates received about 55 percent of the industry's contributions while Democratic candidates received about 45 percent. Of the 13 campaign finance sectors tracked by OpenSecrets.org, the military industry ranked as the third most bipartisan. This suggests a maximalist approach to securing political influence; by giving money to both parties, the industry buys its influence regardless of which party holds power. Notably, this trend holds among individuals associated with some of the top contractors, not just across the industry in aggregate. For example, Lockheed Martin shelled out 54 percent to Republicans and 45 percent to Democrats. General Dynamics donated 51 percent to Republicans and 46 percent to Democrats.[18]

Backdoor Earmarks

Another sign of the military industry's growing influence is the growing cost of congressional program increases in the Pentagon budget. Every year, appropriators anonymously add hundreds of increases for specific projects with little to no justification. While these increases are theoretically supposed to be competitively awarded, or awarded for projects that received competitive awards in the past, in practice, they can function as backdoor earmarks, allowing lawmakers to direct money to companies that operate in their states and districts and contribute to their campaigns.

In FY2026, Congress enacted 1,090 increases totaling nearly $34 billion in the FY2026 Pentagon budget, a 60 percent increase in cost from FY2024.[19] Just 32 of the 1,090 increases could be connected to publicly sponsored House floor amendments. Most strikingly, 822 of the increases, or 75 percent, funded projects for which the Pentagon had requested no funding at all. Those "Zero to Hero" increases cost taxpayers more than $17.5 billion this year.[20]

Recent media investigations offer illustrative examples of companies leveraging this practice to exert influence on the Pentagon budget. For example, *ProPublica* investigations revealed that a company called Navatek orchestrated an extensive campaign to secure Pentagon contracts in exchange for campaign contributions to multiple lawmakers, including Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Susan Collins (R-ME), the late Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and Rep. James Clyburn (D-SC).[21]

In June, CQ reported that Congress proposed a $577 million increase for Paladin self-propelled howitzers, despite the Army pushing to end Paladin production in FY2027 in favor of HIMARS launchers and a new mobile tactical cannon. House Appropriations Committee Chair Tom Cole (R-OK) was likely responsible for the increase. The final assembly and integration of the Paladin howitzers is done by BAE Systems in Elgin, Oklahoma, in Representative Cole's district. In each of the past five election cycles, BAE Systems contributed $20,000 to Cole's campaign committee and leadership PAC.[22]

Yet another example of a potential conflict of interest shaping the Pentagon budget is detailed in a 2026 *Minnesota Star Tribune* investigation, which offered some evidence that Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), the

House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Ranking Member and incoming Chair, alongside her former Chief of Staff turned military industry lobbyist Bill Harper, pushed the Pentagon to award approximately $100 million to North Wind, a Minnesota-based aerospace company.[23] According to the investigation, North Wind contributed over $10,000 to Rep. McCollum's campaign.

Project Meridian

In Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's September 30, 2026, "State of the Force" speech, he announced Project Meridian, a new 120-day program tasked with offering recommendations on the future of warfare, to be co-led by SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, Anduril co-founder Palmer Luckey, and former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich.[24] Both SpaceX and Anduril are major government contractors with billions in military-related revenue each year. Having the leaders of companies who profit from Pentagon contracts advising the Pentagon on what investments to make poses obvious conflicts of interest.



Palmer Luckey, Newt Gingrich, and Elon Musk stand when mentioned during Secretary Hegseth's State of the Force speech on September 30, 2026. (Photo: Assistant Secretary of War for Public Affairs Sean Parnell/X.)

That concern is only reinforced by Musk and Luckey's political spending habits. Musk donated at least $446 million to Republican candidates and PACs in the 2026 election cycle, and $277 million to President Trump and other Republicans in the 2024 election cycle.[25] Luckey has donated at least $5.9 million to Republicans since 2017.[26] Musk and Luckey's campaign contributions raise questions about whether their companies have been winning government contracts on merit, or rather thanks to the influence those contributions purchased. For instance, shortly after President Trump retook office, NASA obligated hundreds of millions to SpaceX while cancelling a major space program with Boeing.[27] Luckey's contributions have raised similar concerns, since his extensive Republican fundraising coincided with Anduril securing substantial Pentagon business, including an Army contract worth up to $20 billion awarded without full competition.[28]

By elevating Musk and Luckey to arbiters of the future of conflict, Project Meridian risks outsourcing our military strategies and spending decisions to two of the people who stand to gain the most from recommending strategies that call for dramatic increases in military spending. Their own statements suggest their security solutions may involve immense spending of taxpayer dollars on unproven military systems that their companies specialize in, from doubling down on AI systems that risk expanding conflicts and making deadly errors, to space-based weaponry that poses serious strategic and economic risks.[29]

Reconciliation

The budget reconciliation process is a legislative procedure created in 1974 that allows for certain budget-related bills to pass the Senate with a simple majority. The process was initially conceived as a tool to reduce the federal deficit. However, in recent years, both parties have used reconciliation to pass major spending on partisan lines.

In July 2025, Congress enacted the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) through budget reconciliation, which provided more than $156 billion in additional Pentagon spending on top of the military's regular annual appropriations, essentially creating a second Pentagon budget.[30] The bill included approximately $29 billion for shipbuilding, $25.4 billion for munitions, $24.4 billion for Golden Dome, $14.7 billion for nuclear weapons, and $8.6 billion for military aircraft, among other investments. OBBBA is projected to add $4.7 trillion to the national debt through 2035.[31]

This new tranche of spending, which led to an overall increase in military spending of about 18 percent over the prior year's enacted levels, was a major windfall for America's major military contractors. General Dynamics and Huntington Ingalls have already seen billions of dollars' worth of contract awards for additional destroyers and submarines. Northrop Grumman benefited from large investments in the B-21 bomber and Sentinel ICBM. Boeing stands to bring in billions for additional F-15EX production and development of the F-47. Lockheed Martin, RTX, and others will benefit from extensive new munitions spending.[32]

Federal lobbying disclosure forms show that the military contractors that benefited most from the bill spent millions lobbying Congress on the additional military spending.[33] Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) explicitly called out four major military contractors, RTX (formerly Raytheon), Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, and Northrop Grumman, for lobbying for tax breaks.[34] Those tax breaks, which remained in the bill, padded the contractors' already sky-high profits and worsened the federal deficit. The four contractors identified by Senator Warren collectively increased their net profits by $2.07 billion in 2025, an increase of 11.5 percent.[35]

Despite last year's enormous military spending increase, the Pentagon is seeking another unprecedented reconciliation military spending package this year to the tune of $350 billion in taxpayer dollars – more than double the amount included in OBBBA last year. That $350 billion request includes funding for a number of wasteful projects, including $17.5 billion for Golden Dome.[36] Golden Dome's immense long term costs are a bad deal for taxpayers, as we have extensively detailed.[37] That $350 billion through reconciliation, combined with the $1.15 trillion requested for traditional appropriations, brings the total Pentagon budget request to $1.5 trillion, surpassing inflation-adjusted U.S. military spending at the height of World War II.[38]

As with the $156 billion in reconciliation Pentagon spending in OBBBA, the military industry would reap enormous profits if the $350 billion in the FY2027 reconciliation request is enacted. The usual suspects –

Lockheed Martin, RTX, General Dynamics, and Huntington Ingalls – stand to gain the most, though Musk and Luckey's SpaceX and Anduril would also benefit from the request's focus on Golden Dome and automation.

In case Pentagon contractors needed more reasons to lobby lawmakers for reconciliation, the administration explicitly asked them to help sell the plan to Congress. The Washington Post reported that in late July, the administration invited military firms, including Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Boeing, Anduril, and Palantir, to the White House to meet with Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles, Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought, and White House Legislative Affairs Director James Braid.[39] At that meeting, the White House asked company executives to help them get Congress on board with the $350 billion reconciliation request.

But many of the biggest industry names were on the case well before that. Federal lobbying disclosures show that companies like General Dynamics were lobbying for military spending in a potential FY2027 reconciliation bill before the Pentagon even rolled out its formal budget request in April.[40]

While funding from OBBBA has largely gone to contract already, the $350 billion reconciliation request is far less likely to materialize. The midterm election delivering major wins for candidates that ran in part on a promise to rein in the Iran War and oppose new war spending has further diminished its prospects, underscoring that there are still limits to the industry's influence.

Industry Revenue

Each year, Defense News publishes a list of the top 100 global military industry companies by military revenue.[41] From 2024-2025, 14 of the top 20 U.S. firms saw their military earnings grow by at least 2 percent. Eleven of these companies experienced growth of at least 5 percent. Collectively, these top 20 companies increased their military revenue by more than $20.6 billion between 2024 and 2025, a 6.5 percent increase.

The data show that firms that spent the most on lobbying generally saw above average revenue growth. The top five lobbying spenders in 2025—Lockheed Martin, RTX, General Dynamics, Boeing, and Honeywell—increased their combined military revenue by 8 percent, compared with 6.5 percent for the top 20 firms. The military industry's increased revenue in 2025 far surpassed the rate of inflation, which was 2.7 percent over the 12-month period ending in September 2025.[42]

Figure 4. Top 20 U.S. Companies by 2025 Military Revenue

Rank	Company	2025 Military Revenue (in millions)	2024 Military Revenue (in millions)	Military Revenue Change
1	Lockheed Martin	$72,137	$68,390	+5.5%

2	RTX	$46,000	$43,000	+7.0%
3	General Dynamics	$39,400	$36,400	+8.2%
4	Northrop Grumman	$37,037	$36,631	+1.1%
5	Boeing	$35,742	$31,750	+12.6%
6	L3Harris Technologies	$17,391	$16,982	+2.4%
7	Huntington Ingalls Industries	$12,301	$11,527	+6.7%
8	Leidos	$11,982	$11,558	+3.7%
9	Amentum	$8,300	$8,500	-2.4%
10	Booz Allen Hamilton	$7,969	$7,810	+2.0%
11	CACI International	$7,293	$7,267	+0.4%
12	Honeywell	$7,220	$6,091	+18.5%
13	GE Aerospace	$6,574	$6,109	+7.6%
14	Bechtel	$5,700	$3,080	+85.1%
15	KBR	$4,464	$4,968	-10.1%
16	V2X	$4,252	$3,921	+8.4%
17	Peraton	$4,100	$4,376	-6.3%
18	Textron Inc.	$3,993	$3,370	+18.5%
19	TransDigm	$3,883	$3,262	+19.0%
20	SAIC	$3,778	$3,873	-2.5%

Conclusion

The military industry has amassed enormous political influence over American national security policy and spending. Military contractors spend hundreds of millions annually lobbying for bills, programs, and spending practices that benefit their bottom line while pushing the costs onto taxpayers. The military industry also garners political influence by making substantial campaign contributions to lawmakers across the political spectrum, ensuring a degree of influence no matter which party holds power. Reflecting this influence, Congress routinely supports increases in military spending that outpace inflation. It also adds tens of billions of dollars to the Pentagon budget each year for pet projects, many of which the military never requested. While increasingly slim prospects of a $1.5 trillion Pentagon budget suggest there are limits to the industry's influence, the industry's unwarranted influence on U.S. military spending and strategy is not going away. On the heels of a major power shift in the nation's capital, the next question for taxpayers is whether the 120th Congress will work to curtail the industry's undue influence, or continue embracing it.

Endnotes

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