

Defense Conversion and the New Peace

By Kevin J. Cassidy

The Berlin Wall, the Iron Curtain, and the Cold War were all realities of the postwar world. Now, in an amazingly brief time, everything has changed. The Soviet Union no longer exists. As Russia and the other independent republics search for new ways to govern themselves, the nations of eastern Europe are also moving ahead with their experiments in democracy. While there remain an abundance of conventional and nuclear weapons among these countries and those of the western alliance, it is clear that the superpower arms race has been changed forever. The question then arises: how should we think about our national security policy now that the Cold War is over, and how should teachers, including teacher educators, address this important issue?

But for most Americans national security is not defined by military considerations alone, as important as those may be. Real security also includes a dependable job with a decent income, affordable housing in a community free of crime, a sound economy and reduced national deficit, a healthy environment, and medical care available to all. Meeting such needs in difficult economic times would appear all but impossible without some resources as yet undiscovered. Americans need to look for new ways to meet their country's domestic needs just as they've begun reinventing their nation's foreign policy.

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Defense Conversion

The link between the domestic and international dimensions of national security is defense conversion: the planned transformation of excess military production to civilian purposes. There is much new disarmament thinking which indicates that it is possible to both drastically reduce world arsenals while also maintaining international security. There is also abundant research showing that conversion of weapons production is doable and, if carefully planned for, capable of freeing up the resources necessary to revitalize the nation's economy and to meet domestic needs.

The obstacles to conversion are neither technical nor economic, but are more broadly political: our ideas about national security policy as well as the institutions that formulate and implement it. These ideas and values and the institutions that represent them are profoundly committed to the status quo in national security thinking. It is appropriate that we, as educators, encourage students—who so often accept these ideas and institutions without serious examination—to consider them in terms of their impact on society. A viable democracy requires this kind of analytical thinking by its citizens. The task of this article is to provide such an analysis by presenting the kind of alternative vision of national security that defense conversion could make possible.

The article is divided into four sections. The first looks at the question of disarmament and the concept of “common security” which would make it possible for the superpowers to achieve international security without their enormous arsenals. The second section considers the kind of economic planning necessary to bring about conversion of those weapons facilities rendered unnecessary by common security. Comprehensive planning will be necessary requiring a significant role for government as well as for defense firms. This means a rethinking of the relationship between the private and public sectors in America, and using the institutions of both to implement an industrial policy capable of responding to national needs. The third section examines the implications of defense conversion for curtailing the impact on national policy of the military-industrial complex. The latter term refers to the institutional power of defense contractors, those in Congress who represent them, and the military brass. By generating alternative goals for the economy, conversion can help to reduce the pressure generated by these groups for more weapons systems. A fourth section briefly evaluates the Clinton administration's conversion program. Finally, it should be noted that this analysis of national security policy, and defense conversion in particular, is consistent with the social democracy goals of the Society for Educational Reconstruction.

Common Security and Disarmament

The fundamental issue is whether national security is best achieved through acquiring more weapons. Experience with the appeasement of Hitler would seem to support the traditional wisdom that “if you want peace, prepare for war,” and that

the best way to prepare for war is to accumulate more weapons than your adversary. Doing so threatens the “enemy” with certain defeat should an attack be launched on your territory, and therefore deters the adversary from ever contemplating such an aggression. This is a “more is better” approach: build more weapons and you establish more security.

Deterrence does succeed in making it clear to an adversary that aggression cannot succeed. That much is obvious and undeniable. The problem is that the adversary has plenty to fear even without attacking because the other side’s arsenal is capable of wreaking destruction whether the adversary plans aggression or not. As a result, there is a state of permanent insecurity and the adversary’s only response is to create the same situation for the other side. One’s threat to the “enemy” is therefore the same threat that prevents one from ever feeling secure. This is especially true today when the new weapons technology and delivery systems, referred to as “extended deterrence,” have made it possible to launch an attack far more quickly. As long as each side possesses this offensive capability, true security by either side is impossible.

In light of all this, the current debate about whether the United States should make greater or lesser efforts for defense misses the point. The real question is not more or less, but the **kind** of efforts to be made. Building offensive weapons mistakes security for a “zero sum” game in which any insecurity we can create for the other side automatically means more security for us. Instead, the real goal should be to increase one’s security while making certain that the security of the other side is not threatened. This sets in motion a reciprocity between the two sides. Security can be a “win/win” game in which the security of one side can enhance the security of the other by diminishing the need to threaten the other.

This balance is called “common security” because it is based on the principle that true security is achieved jointly.¹ Efforts to go it alone by building more weapons do not add to security, because they will inevitably threaten the other side and provoke a counterthreat. Common security, on the other hand, insists that security is only possible when both sides feel secure and unthreatened. The goal is to build mutual reassurance by recognizing the legitimate security needs of the other side and avoiding any action that might jeopardize them. This approach holds the possibility of reducing the role of force in international affairs. By scaling back to unambiguously defensive capacities, each superpower would be providing for its own security while simultaneously diminishing the value of military might.

Common security proposes “mutual defensive superiority” in which each side would possess a defense strong enough to prevent an invasion of its borders. Weaponry, both nuclear and conventional, would be short range in order to repel an attack without threatening the other country’s territory. Weapons would be deployed away from the opponent’s borders in order not to be viewed by the other side as first strike systems. Common security would have each side establish an effective defense while relinquishing any system capable of doing more than actual defense.

Defense Conversion

Common security proponents also advocate that the major powers adopt a noninterventionary policy toward the nations of the Third World. This would promote reliance on international peacekeeping institutions and other, regional organizations. It would also require the major powers to pull back their forward-based forces in client countries around the world and to more vigorously control the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Finally, common security would also necessitate commitment to bans on the testing of weapons of mass destruction as a means of curtailing the continued development of more arsenals.

The principles of common security make it clear that the security of the United States, if planned for in this multilateral fashion, need not require the enormous arsenals this nation still possesses. In the context of common security, conversion, far from weakening the nation's security, would enhance it.

Conversion and Industrial Policy

The national security of the United States is not limited to its relations with the rest of the globe, but also involves the nation's ability to meet its fundamental domestic needs. Here again, conversion can play a central role, although the conversion process should not be viewed as a separate, unique task, but as part of the larger goal of revitalizing the country's entire industrial base. The nation now faces a series of daunting economic tasks: restoring the competitiveness of its civilian industry; renewing its infrastructure; providing good education, housing, and health care; and cleaning up the environment. What is required is a new national industrial and technology policy to prioritize production needs, a national needs agenda to redirect the resources of the United States.

America's civilian manufacturing has been handicapped by the nation's huge investment in military production. Over the past 40 years, the military budget has actually exceeded the monetary value of all civilian industry's facilities and the nation's public infrastructure combined! In reality, the country **has** had an industrial policy during these years, but it has been disguised as defense policy and therefore never evaluated in appropriate terms. The task now is to create an effective industrial policy and integrate economic conversion as a component of it.

Industrial policy, while a relatively new term, actually has a long history in the United States. In the 19th century, the nation's railroads were built with government grants and the American steel industry rose to prominence when foreign producers were not allowed to build rails for the railroads. In a similar manner, the interstate highway system created the internal markets that the construction machinery manufacturers used to develop their economies of scale that enabled them to dominate world markets. American agricultural policy started with government sponsored research and development through state agricultural colleges and later through government experimental farms. Later, major improvements in the physical infrastructure of the country as well as reclamation and conservation projects,

subsidized by the government, made it possible for agriculture to become a high-tech industry. The government's Rural Electrification Administration was especially helpful to agriculture by making possible enormous increases in production through the employment of electrical machinery (Thurow, 1985). In short, American agriculture did not achieve its preeminence through the unfettered free market, but as the result of deliberate policy.

Moreover, every president since Calvin Coolidge has formed organizations of government officials and businessmen to foster the development of industries deemed important to the national economy. The government has consistently intervened in the workings of the economy through a variety of means including tariffs, quotas, voluntary export agreements, and bailouts of particular firms, as well as the allocation of private credit. Finally, government purchasing power has given it a substantial influence in the economy.

There is an important difference, however, between industrial policy as currently conceived, and earlier variants of government intervention. In Robert Reich's (1983) phrase, government involvement must be "more explicit and more strategic" (p. 28) than in the past. Instead of the "outright giveaways," such as tax abatements, tax credits, and quotas, these and other forms of government assistance will now be formally tied to a program of national goals. Required is a broad strategy to rebuild the nation's economic capacity and to respond to fundamental domestic needs. The latter could include such areas as economic stability, the environment, health care, housing, and so forth. These priorities would then guide both public and private sector investment in the same manner that military security served as the primary focus of United States' industrial policy throughout the Cold War period.

As Joel Yudken (1993) has pointed out, what is needed is an industrial policy for **each** of these areas of national need. Each policy would imply "a specific set of goals, criteria, and standards for the design and implementation of government policies, programs, and investments for focusing activity in the private sector, just as the overarching concern of defense conditioned how public spending helped shape industrial, scientific, and technological development in the past" (p. 67).²The capital, production facilities, and skilled workers previously committed on such a large scale to military production could now be redirected to these areas of civilian need. In this manner conversion would take place as part of an overall national plan for meeting the nation's needs rather than as a separate, independent process.

The need for a national needs agenda as a coordinating plan for defense conversion is especially important in light of the frequent opposition to conversion by numerous defense contractors. The executives of these firms have rarely, if ever, functioned in the more competitive civilian free-enterprise economy and they seldom possess the skills for doing so. Not surprisingly, they prefer to lay off large numbers of workers or even sell off the defense segment of their corporation rather than consider conversion as an alternative. A national needs-based industrial policy, of which conversion would be a part, could provide the motivation and

assistance for these firms to convert to civilian efforts.

Conversion and the Military-Industrial Complex

Conversion could also help to open up the process by which national security policy is formulated. It is obvious from the literature on defense contracting that such policy is not the result of careful, analytical judgment of security needs. Instead, it is often the expression of the private interests of defense contractors who want to boost company profits, of members of Congress protecting the jobs of their constituents, and of some military professionals who want to have available any and all weapons that can be produced regardless of strategic need. The result is a bureaucratic entity that is insulated from public control and which operates primarily in the interests of its component parts rather than in the public interest.³

The economic basis of this military-industrial complex is made especially clear by Gordon Adams (1984) in his book *The Politics of Defense Contracting* that focuses on defense contractors in explaining the impact of vested economic interests on the formulation of weapons policy by the Congress and the Pentagon. In this respect, the military-industrial complex is perhaps the best example of Juergen Habermas' understanding of the relationship between technology and advanced capitalism. In such a society, social thought is always fundamentally conservative, he argues, because it focuses on improving the performance of existing forms of organization and avoids normative issues that might be raised about the nature and practice of its power. This situation, referred to by Habermas as "technological consciousness," is an accurate description of the military-industrial complex that, in a self-perpetuating manner, uncritically promotes endless technological "advances" in military hardware. Its ability to do this without limitation by other parts of the government or the public is an example of Habermas' argument that advanced capitalist societies, having lost their capacity for self-criticism because of vested economic interests, are unable to seriously evaluate the social effects of production.⁴

Within the liberal tradition, this issue of control of the public policy process by vested economic interests is summed up in Theodore Lowi's (1979) concept of "interest group liberalism." Lowi argues that the expanded role of government in the post-New Deal era has been dominated by interest groups that have come to be the primary shapers and beneficiaries of this new role of government. The "interest group liberalism" concept corresponds accurately to the phenomenon of the military-industrial complex. Much the same point has been made earlier by the power elite theorists, beginning with C. Wright Mills (1956), who documented the interlocking class relationship that existed among the elites controlling the governmental, industrial, and military sectors.

Whether one uses the "technocratic consciousness" concept of Habermas, the "interest group liberalism" of Lowi, or the "power elite" of Mills, however, the issue

is fundamentally the same: the inability to formulate public policy in the public interest because of a consistent, effective control of the public policy process by private, economic interests.

Defense conversion represents the possibility of changing this situation and establishing a public policy process less determined by private interests. By providing alternative, civilian products for military contractors, conversion has the potential to reduce the pressure for bigger military budgets brought by these firms and members of Congress in whose districts these firms are located. With this potential reduction in the military budget also comes the opportunity for greater public control over military policy. As less military hardware is produced, the influence of defense contractors might also be reduced, creating the possibility that voices not connected to either defense contractors or the Pentagon could be heard. Conversion can help to reduce the power of the inherently undemocratic military-industrial complex (as well as the effects of “technological consciousness”), thus enabling citizens to exercise greater influence over military policy—*i.e.*, to make the policy process more democratic.

The crucial point is that conversion offers the opportunity to have a **structural** impact which the peace movement has never been able to accomplish. By confining itself to short-term efforts to stop this or that weapon system, the peace movement left intact the structures responsible for the military build-up. The same is true for arms control, which reduces the number of older weapons systems so that newer ones can be more readily financed. Again, the power of the arms manufacturers and their allies in the military-industrial complex remains unchanged. Only conversion and disarmament programs, such as common security, can adequately affect the power of these institutions so that the priorities of the nation can be changed and work can begin on a national needs agenda.

Clinton's Conversion Program

Conversion has been initiated under the Clinton administration, but it is not the comprehensive program that the nation requires. Clinton has taken the first step, however, in establishing clear federal leadership on this issue. His “Defense Reinvestment and Conversion Initiative” will commit \$20 billion over the next five years to help workers and communities adjust to defense cuts. Specifically, the government will provide transition and training benefits for laid-off military personnel and civilian workers, retraining for displaced defense industry workers, and economic adjustment assistance to defense-dependent communities, as well as substantial funding for high-tech programs to hopefully provide opportunities for defense firms and communities. Supervision of the various programs will be parcelled out among the Department of Defense, the Veterans Administration, the Economic Development Administration of the Commerce Department, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and the Department of Labor.

Defense Conversion

The key element, at least for the long term, is the Administration's investment in high-tech industry. However, it is very doubtful that this program will be adequate to offset the large-scale defense cuts for the manufacturing sectors and industrial workers. Thus, there will remain the central challenge of finding ways to build bridges between declining defense industries and occupations and those that are to be generated by the initiative in civilian reinvestment. This is part of the larger problem in the Clinton approach: the absence of a clearly-defined national needs agenda that could help direct the use of resources from the defense industry.

Among further needs the Clinton administration must address are the following:

- ⇒ a central coordinating and planning body to streamline procedure and to speed access;
- ⇒ incentives such as investment tax credits to induce defense firms to move into the new high-tech civilian economy;
- ⇒ funding for educational assistance to retrain engineers and scientists and also for enterprise development to facilitate innovations such as employee buyouts and community redevelopment projects.⁵

Conclusion

This essay has argued that new security approaches such as common security make the huge arsenals of the superpowers unnecessary. The disarmament that is part of common security, then, makes it possible for the United States to respond to its myriad domestic needs through conversion planning. This new understanding of national security is enjoying an ever-wider constituency, as increasing numbers of Americans make the connection between establishing a non-militarist foreign policy and meeting longstanding domestic needs. Conversion then is not just the question of "How do we convert excess defense capacity?" but also "How can we reinvest defense savings to improve national economic security?" Everyone in the country has a stake in the latter question, not just the members of the defense-dependent communities. Teachers, for example, can recognize that the funding so long needed for education and yet denied to it could become available with this approach to national security. Moreover, it is only through improved educational training that American citizens will possess the skills necessary to make their country secure in the new and competitive global marketplace. Accordingly, it is all the more important that teacher educators understand and promote innovative, critical thinking on the issue of real national security. Our political responsibility requires us to help build a constituency for defense conversion and the new national priorities that can be established along with it.

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of common security, especially in comparison to traditional national security thought, see Gregory A. Bischak, "Cooperative Security, Disarma-

- ment and the Construction of International Peacekeeping Institutions,” in Kevin J. Cassidy and Gregory A. Bischak, eds., *Real Security: Converting the Military Economy and Building Peace*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993. Pp. 11-40.
2. Yudken’s essay is a comprehensive treatment relating conversion to both technology development and to a national needs agenda.
 3. Compelling examples of this are provided by Gar Alperovitz and Jeff Faux, *Rebuilding America*. New York: Pantheon, 1984. Pp. 17-18.
 4. For a concise summary of Habermas’ theory see Russell L. Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 376-387.
 5. For this summary of the Clinton program I have relied on Gregory A. Bischak, “President Clinton’s 1993 Conversion Program,” in Cassidy and Bischak, eds., *Real Security: Converting the Military Economy and Building Peace*.

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